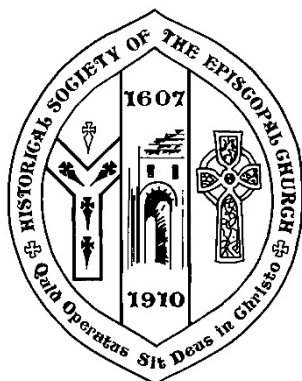


# Kenyon C. Burke Oral History, Interview One, in Four Parts: Transcript



African American Episcopal Historical Collection

Virginia Theological Seminary Archives

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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:** March 8, 2016

**Length of Recorded Interview:** Approximately 2 hours 30 minutes

**Abstract:**

In this interview, Dr. Kenyon C. Burke discusses 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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**Transcribed:** March 2016

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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. Tyrone Pitts:**     **Well, Kenyon.**

Dr. Burke: Hi Ty.

**Pitts: How you doing?**

Burke: I am doing very fine.

**Pitts: Good, good.**

Burke: I am very excited about our project here. Finally we got it off the ground. I am sure Dr. Thompson is also excited [laughter] that we got it off the ground.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. Well first of all Kenyon, I just want to say to you that it is a privilege and an honor to be here with you. It is very seldom that a mentee has the opportunity to interview his or her mentor and I am just so grateful for this opportunity. Today is March 8, 2016 and we are at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. I was born—just so you know my date of birth—March 17, 1947. So Kenyon when were you born? What is your date of birth?**

Burke: I was born in 1930 (09/25/1930) [00:01:00] in the height of the Depression in Cleveland, Ohio.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: Yeah that was a very stressful time for the whole nation. I remember the impact that some of the black professionals in town experienced, especially on our street. One of the doctors, who usually you think of as being wealthy, or at least rich in black communities—his daughter was sleeping on an orange crate.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: She did not have a bed.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: It was a very testing time for all of us, and of course for more of the black community it was more severe than the white community. But it was tough. It was an industrial town, too. So there were a lot of people there from all over the world, because the Eastern and Western Europeans flocked into Cleveland because that was one of the industrial centers [00:02:00] [in the United States] where they made steel and automobiles and stuff like that.

**Pitts: Wow. So you were born in a very important time in history. How in the world did you become an Episcopalian? I mean I am from Virginia and the two major denominations here were the Baptists and Episcopalians. I could never understand that. But how did you become Episcopalian? And what did those roots seem like?**

Burke: Well I am going to tell a family secret.

**Pitts: Oh, okay.**

Burke: Of how we became Episcopalian. My grandmother had two sons. My father was the oldest, Kenyon T. Burke. I am Kenyon C. Burke.

**Pitts: Okay.**

Burke: His brother was Ralph Burke. Anyway, they were attending Congregational Sunday school.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: Yes. That is where they were going. So one day, they came home and the boys were crying. They were upset, because [00:03:00] at the Sunday School, the teacher was handing out oranges, and when they got to them they had run out.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: My grandmother was so incensed that she marched them out of the Sunday school class, after challenging the leadership in the Sunday School, and took her sons out and enrolled them in the Episcopal Church Sunday School.

**Pitts: At least they had oranges, right [laughter].**

Burke: That is right. That is a true story. Now my other grandparent were Congregationalist, and somehow they went back and forth between the Methodists and the AME's, African-Episcopal Methodists, and the Episcopal Church. Because you Baptists had a lot of restrictions. [00:04:00]

**Pitts: Right [laughter].**

Burke: And in the undercroft, what it was called at the time, of the Episcopal Church, they could dance.

**Pitts: Oh okay.**

Burke: So, my grandparents enjoyed dancing.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: So it was a mixture. It was really something. But that is how I became—and I was christened in Cincinnati, Ohio at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. Cincinnati was my mother's home. And we moved to Cleveland, at least I moved to Cleveland two years later and I was at St. Andrew's in Cleveland. I was confirmed at St. Andrew's.

**Pitts: Oh, okay.**

Burke: As a young teenager, very young. I was an Acolyte. I was first what we call a boat boy, and

they carry incense [00:05:00] and you walk next to the thurifer—that is the guy that swung the censer. And of course I quickly became the thurifer. I enjoyed that for a number of years, which was on Sunday morning. I would smoke up the Church.

**Pitts:** [Laughter].

Burke: I really enjoyed that. I enjoyed the swinging of the thurifer, but also I enjoyed the pageantry. We had seventeen people on the altar at one time.

**Pitts:** Wow.

Burke: That was a first and second server, the third and fourth server, the thurifer and the guy—there was another name for those that carried the tapers. I cannot remember. But so many people on the altar [00:06:00] that they had one person who had the title of Master of Ceremonies to direct all this traffic.

**Pitts:** [Laughter] Wow.

Burke: It was up and down. So this was a very high church.

**Pitts:** Sure, sure. It sounds like it.

Burke: And like many churches, black churches in the Episcopal Faith here in the United States, many of them were led by a West Indian priest. They brought a different perspective and custom. Now how they came and their history is another interesting story, but I will not get into that. But the person who trained me to be an Acolyte later became a Bishop, Bishop Irving Mason.

**Pitts:** Wow.

Burke: He later became a Bishop in Michigan, the Diocese of Detroit. He was a few years ahead of me in school and so he kind of took me under his wing while I was in church anyway. [00:07:00] Then, of course, another thing happened, at ten thirty I was doing this smoking up the church thing, but at twelve fifteen or twelve thirty I was at the AME Church for Sunday School.

**Pitts:** Wow.

Burke: You say wow, why were you such an Ecumenist, but I was there because that is where the girls were.

**Pitts:** [Laughter].

Burke: That is really true.

**Pitts:** Right.

Burke: We went up there. Most of us did. This was a Jim Crow time, so being Ecumenical was no big deal to us. In the afternoon we would go to the Baptist Youth Group events (BYPU).

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: I think we were really Ecumenists. The other thing was I grew up in a Jewish Community, an Orthodox Jewish Community.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: A lot of Orthodox. I turned off the lights in the Synagogue on Friday night (Shabbos goy).

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: That [00:08:00] was an interesting period because the immigrants were coming in and were fleeing Hitler, and they came into our school system in droves. Now of course the resident Jewish Community looked down upon them and made fun of them.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: Because they wore funny clothes, and their complexion was not too healthy looking.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: But, when the grades came out these folks blew the top off the curve.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: And that was the end of that.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: I learned class structure from the Jewish Community because I lived and watched their class structure. But that was a time and we are talking about just prior to World War II. That is when that was. So I had this kind of experience of knowing that there were other faiths and they were just as important as ours. [00:09:00] At that time people who were in the Roman Catholic Faith could not go to other churches.

**Pitts: Okay.**

Burke: There were a lot of restrictions on life in those days, much more than there should have been, much more than you have now. That was a learning experience. Of course the people that got out of Germany were the people that somebody in the house could always play a cello. These were the folks that were the intellectuals and had some money and they got out. I got to learn that. And I learned when World War II came and the money started flowing in the economy those people were able to move out and leave, the Eastern European Jews. And when we played an athletic event, one or two of us [00:10:00] who were on the athletic team for the high school, we sat on the bench. There was a grudge game between with those that got out. But anyways.

**Pitts: That was great.**

Burke: It was beginning of my awareness of social justice, in a very naïve way, not knowing the depths of it. But my family made sure that I knew who we were. I read the *Negro Digest*, and all the great writers at that time. Black writers wrote in there and we read that. We always had books like *Native Son* and all those. I also knew where we lived, to get to [00:11:00] the—how can I say—to get to the black Episcopal Church it was two street car rides. We had to transfer this way and that way. So it was about a forty-five minute trip.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: What happened was to do the same thing to go to the YMCA, the black YMCA, was the same thing. We would pass the white Y and we would pass the white Episcopal Church and then we go down into what was called, the Central Ward it was called, yes. That thing about not being able to go to certain restaurants, this is up north.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: The Jim Crow Laws and practices were uneven.

**Pitts: Yeah. [00:12:00]**

Burke: For example, this is a little off on this, but in Cleveland there were a few black people in the Council.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: At that time. Yeah and there were, I think the Director of Planning in Cleveland was a black man.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: Who lived in our community.

**Pitts: That is amazing.**

Burke: Yeah really amazing. I remember the first black judge was elected in Cleveland, it must have been when I was in high school. And I came out of high school in 1948. It was uneven, and that is why when people ask you what it was like, it was like a lot of things.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: All of that taught me that [00:13:00] the [Jim Crow] system was saying some people were more equal than others. I had an understanding of Jewish oppression. I understood ours. So I just was always interested in this race thing, and why this uneven thing? Then my father was active in developing union organizing, and he organized the local Red Caps, which belonged to A. Philip Randolph's Union, the Sleeping Car Porters. That was just family was like that. My mother was a

Social Worker. Although the teacher hiring practice was strange. My mother was trained at Wilberforce for two years.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: As a teacher [00:14:00], and they had another name for those schools and I will think of it later. (They were called Normal Schools.) She transferred to the University of Cincinnati, took all the credits and got certified as a teacher, and then when they moved to Cleveland she could not teach in the Cleveland system because they would not hire married women.

**Pitts: Oh wow. It had nothing to do with her color, but it was because she was married.**

Burke: Yeah. She went to Western Reserve and became a Social Worker.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Education was always a value in the family, and I was around people that had achieved. I was not interested in that so much. I was interested in having a good time growing up as a kid.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: But I knew these people. The doctor lived next door.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Who also was a flight surgeon for General Ben Davis with the Tuskegee.

**Pitts: Yeah. [00:15:00]**

Burke: All I have to say is that was the start. That is a long answer to a very, very short and simple question.

**Pitts: Yeah but it was a great answer. I also heard that you had a grandfather that was in the Civil War? Tell me about that history.**

Burke: I had a great-uncle and a great-grandfather who served in the Civil War. It was the Ohio Twenty-Seventh for Colored Troops.

**Pitts: Oh okay.**

Burke: They never got into battle but they signed up. When they came back, the great-grandfather's trade was a cobbler, and they came from now West Virginia, no, no they came from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, that is the other side of the family and they came [00:16:00] to Cleveland in the 1850s.

**Pitts: Wow.**



Burke: He set up this cobbler shop and he was a specialist. He only made shoes for wealthy people.

**Pitts: He was smart.**

Burke: That is the truth. That is where the money was.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: He had this shop and his shop became a locale, a locus you could say, for the community people to come and express their concerns about what was going on civically and all of that kind of stuff. So, when you think about it, this stuff must be in my genes.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: Because early on there was interest in the family of education and gaining equality and social justice. That is the Cleveland period and I am going to leave that alone.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Although the one thing that I think is very important for Episcopalians, and that I am very proud of, while I was there, [00:17:00] I do not know whether I just said this but Bishop Denby spent his time in Cleveland, and I knew him.

**Pitts: Tell me a little bit about Bishop Demby. You said you knew him.**

Burke: Well there were two or three Suffragan Bishops. The Episcopal Church decided that they needed to have some black leadership in the Episcopal black Churches. So they came up with the idea of the title or position of Suffragan Bishop. It is almost like an adjutant priest—not quite yes, but not quite no.

**Pitts: Right, no, yeah.**

Burke: His title was Suffragan Bishop of Southern Arkansas, or something, but Arkansas, and he did what Bishops do, he would go around to the black churches [00:18:00] and service them. He was a very scholarly person. First of all, he was a black Mason. He was also both Masons, two kinds, a Prince Hall Mason, but he was also a tradesman.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: But he went to school and studied. And what was interesting to me about him was he would first write his sermon in Greek and then translate it to Latin.

**Pitts: Wow, wow.**

Burke: And then deliver it in English.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: I did not know anybody who would do that.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: You know just a very gentle person. Very strong—he was a Mason—but very gentle. I have to say I had the privilege to serve under him.

**Pitts: You have been really fortunate Kenyon, really fortunate. Let me ask you one other question [00:19:00] about your father and you – did you get to travel with him? Were you able to see what was going on with the Pullman Porters? Was there any kind of...?**

Burke: I can remember my father taking me to the union halls and sitting me up on, well I was big enough to sit up on the bar then. But yeah, he used to take me to some of those meetings. The family—see the family was split. My mother's family was in Cincinnati, and we moved to Cleveland. Now that was two hundred and forty-two miles.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: But there was a big chasm, and even the speech: the people in Cincinnati had this southern thing, and I am up in urban north.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And so I would go visit them very frequently because there was always somebody in the family who worked on the railroad. Either Pullman Porter [00:20:00] or dining car, there was somebody, so I got passes. So they would put me—this was when I was about four years old—they would put me on the train in Cleveland and these people would take care of me all the way down. Later, while serving in the US Air Force during the Korean War, I used that system when traveling back and forth to Cleveland, Ohio.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: In the tradition of...

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: There is a tradition among Pullman Porters. When I would go down there I found out there were certain things you could do and you could not do. For example, you could not go to the—well at that time they had just stopped, discontinued having blacks sit up in the top of movie theaters. But as I got older, I knew something else. Because the day after VJ Day I was in Cincinnati and everybody was celebrating the war was over, but my uncles could get on a trolley car and go down and go [00:21:00] to the racetrack which was here, and right across the road was the amusement park, and blacks could not go to the amusement park. The reason I think, now, as I am older, I figured out, was there was a swimming pool in there.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. They did not want you to swim in it [laughter].**

Burke: They did not want our black bodies in with the white bodies.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: So when my uncles, I had three of them, my uncles from Cincinnati would come to Cleveland, they would make a beeline to this amusement park we had in Cleveland, Euclid Beach.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: It was a joy for me because I just go on to ride and ride and ride all the time.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: All day long, they would ride until they were exhausted.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: It was a silly thing. That Jim Crow made absolutely no sense, and it was irregular, but it impacted all of our institutions, and it surely impacted the Episcopal Church and all the [00:22:00] black churches. That is the Cleveland thing, okay.

**Pitts: Yeah. Well let me ask you a little bit more about your education. Your history is so exciting and dynamic but how did you get where you got to? Where did you start? What kind of degrees did you get?**

Burke: I had a very uneventful tour of duty as a student in public school.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. Okay.**

Burke: I was interested in having a good time. But when I went to college I graduated from Bowling Green State University. And of course the first year I was in there, I did not spend a whole lot of time on the campus because I had met a young lady who lived in Detroit but whose family rented a summer resort cabin. There was a black summer resort, there were two of them in the Midwest, one of them was called Idlewild. [00:23:00] That was in Michigan. That is the one we went to. There was another called Fox Lake, which was in Indiana. That was less developed. But Idlewild had all the black entertainers that would come in there. It was very fascinating. It was the first time I ever knew that blacks could have a summer home. Not just a motorboat—a yacht. And the Jones Brothers out of Chicago, the gangsters what you called, they had a blue roof on, a coral blue roof. They were living well. This is still the Depression.

**Pitts: Wow. [Laughter].**

Burke: I saw that. But anyway, I went to Bowling Green and my first year was uneventful as usual, academically. When I came back I enrolled in what was then called Fenn College in Cleveland, which was already a college started by [00:24:00] the YMCA. I went there and I ran up a lot of credits, and then I went back to Bowling Green after I did my Tour of Duty in the Air Force, and

finished and got a degree in Psychology and a minor in Political Science and Sociology, which began to show where I was going. Even in the Air Force I was into education, and public information, and how to handle that information. Dorothy and I were married in 1953 and we went back to Bowling Green as a married couple, finished the degree, and came to New Jersey because my mother's youngest brother was about twelve years older than me. He was [00:25:00] like a big brother. When he went off to war I kept his record collection which I still have.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. Oh yeah, a great jazz collection.**

Burke: That is how I got interested in jazz. Veterans always made good students because they were more mature. And so we moved to New Jersey with the idea that I would go to law school and practice with my uncle, who was at that time running for Assembly. He took the political route, and later became a judge. By the time I heard I was accepted to law school, I was interested in other things. I got a job and was working for the State Employment Services, an interviewer and tester. I used to administer the psychological testing I had done that in the Air Force. [00:26:00] What happened was I had a nice job with the Employment Services, an elite group, did not look like an ordinary State Employment offices, really clean and for professionals and clerical people. I took a number of State Civil Service Tests and passed all of them, did very well because I knew testing.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: But at the New Jersey Rehabilitation Commission I made more money. They paid about two thousand dollars more. Well, that is a lot of money when you are making thirty-one hundred.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: So I moved to Rehabilitation, I worked with them for a while and I did some experiments with them in counselling in conjunction with Seton Hall University. I was on my way and I think [00:27:00] the movement came along, and it was very exciting to be invited to come into the movement. I was on a project, because as I said the Federal Government had funded counseling techniques, and of course we blew the lid off of it because I had this background.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: I went to the Urban League in town, and that is what we did if you were looking for a job or were in trouble. I went up there and I knew the elderly man who was there, and was the Director, and I said, "Jim can you help me? I am looking around now, my grants are running out." So he said, "Yeah I will look around," and called me in a week and said, "Why don't you come join us?"

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: On the staff, and he offered me a position of Associate Executive Director of Employment and Economic Development. [00:28:00]

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: I had this huge title as long as this table.

**Pitts:** [Laughter].

Burke: The salary was not that good, but better than government employment.

**Pitts:** But the title was.

Burke: But that was what non-profits do.

**Pitts:** Right.

Burke: Big office—the office wasn't that big—but the title was unbelievable. There was not room on most forms. They said what was your title, you know I had to abbreviate.

**Pitts:** [Laughter]..

Burke: Anyway, I said you really do not want me over here, I am one of your biggest critics.

**Pitts:** Right.

Burke: They were not doing anything. I mean what I thought what they should be doing.

**Pitts:** Right.

Burke: He said oh no you come over, so I went. That is really how I got into the movement. When I got into that, one of the things we did was Ecumenical work with other faiths and especially during the Civil Rights Era I spoke a lot at universities [00:29:00] and public forums, and what would happen, I was in Jersey City at Jersey City State College at that time, State University. I was there and we had this platform, and the people from CORE, Congress of Racial Equality.

**Pitts:** Congress of Racial Equality.

Burke: They would show up. I mean they were on the program. And the NAACP, a local secretary was on the program. Then there was a Jewish fellow on the program from the Anti-Defamation League and so I got to know these people. Oftentimes the Urban League or NAACP or the CORE guy would not show up so I would give their speech, I would give all four of them.

**Pitts:** [Laughter].

Burke: Yeah, I would say well this is what they are about, dah, dah, dah, dah. And so one time we were in Jersey City [00:30:00] and that is the one pivotal point for me. We were in Jersey City, at a college in a big arena, and I gave my presentation and sat down, and the guy from the Anti-Defamation League got up and gave his presentation, and the John Birchers were in the bleachers.

**Pitts:** [Laughter].

Burke: And they attacked this guy with all kinds of stuff.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: I got up out of my chair and I pushed him away and I said to the crowd, “Look, these people, they are taking away your program. They are really sabotaging your program. That is the enemy.”

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: And the crowd turned on them.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Now I got a call from this guy from the ADL and he said, “Thank you.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Just like that. So I said, “It was nothing Bob. [00:31:00] You have a right to be on that program like anybody else.”

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: “If they had come after me I would look to you.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: But I turned the crowd on them. So a few weeks later Bob called me and said, well maybe a few months, he called and told me he would like to take me to New York with him to their National Office.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: I said, “Why?” I am condensing this, there is not enough space in this time.

**Pitts: Right, sure.**

Burke: I said, “Why?” And he said, “Well, we might have a position over there for you.”

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: I said, “Bob, I do not want to be segregated twice.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: I really told him. Bob Kohler [Robert Kohler] was the guy’s name. He was the New Jersey ADL Regional Director. I went over there and was interviewed by [00:32:00] the Chairman of ADL of that time who was Dore Schary, great former President of MGM and author of *Sunrise at Campobello*, that was about Roosevelt’s family. Bob told me right after that they really like you.

They have a job for you. So I went to a friend of ours who was an accountant and I said, “Look I have a problem. These folks are offering me a job and I want you to tell me what I should ask for in amount of money.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Because I am not sure I want this job because they were hounding me – what is your reaction.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: It was about a three week span in this, and Bob Kholer was getting shaky and nervous and everything. I got my accountant. [00:33:00] He told me, my buddy the accountant, and I went over and they said, “What would it take to get you over here?” and I gave them the money and they said, “Yeah.”

**Pitts: You wish you had asked for more? Right.**

Burke: I said to myself, “Man, never play yourself short.” So I went to work for them, and I was the first black professional to work for any National Jewish Organization. It was an experiment. It was Dore Schary’s idea. See, the social justice Liberals were in charge of the ADL at that time.

**Pitts: Okay.**

Burke: They were of the Eleanor Roosevelt strain. They had an appreciation for the trade union movement, and Civil and Religious Liberty rights.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: ADL was a middle-class-sponsored organization. That was another thing. So it was valuable in education.

**Pitts: Sure.**

Burke: I had a very interesting time with them. [00:34:00] Obviously being the only one, I had to perform more than anybody else. But I was treated warmly and fairly.

**Pitts: Sure.**

Burke: One of the most significant things I think was I was able to arrange a project where I took the leading black publishers, newspapers’ publishers to Israel.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: The design and the purpose was to see what Israel had done to absorb all these folks from these seventy different countries, speaking about at least that many different languages and cultures, how to absorb them.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And see if there was anything in their struggle that would be helpful to us. We met. The Foreign Minister's office sponsored this.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: It was Abba Eban.

**Pitts: Wow. [00:35:00] Abba.**

Burke: Yeah I have a picture of him, and it is in one of the publications that they have about the black press. So Abba Eban and Golda Meir, and at that time the Israelis were very smart and they allowed us to have meetings with the Arabs.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: We met with the prestigious family (of Anwar Nusseibeh), I will come back to it, and one of the most prestigious families in Jordan without any Israelis around.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: To discuss what the issues were and everything. That was very exciting. But of course I got to see the Holy Land and all of that, and the storybook things you hear about, got to see that. Also, Anwar Nusseibeh [00:36:00] was the family name, Anwar Nusseibeh.

**Pitts: Okay.**

Burke: Like almost like a royalty family.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: In Jordan. So they talked very clearly and we gained their position. And so it was a very educating thing for me. I took one of my friends who was a disc jockey on a black radio station in Harlem with me, so we had all this recorded and these interviews. Then I took a risk of course because no other Jewish organization had done this.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: That was another thing, and you know they are very competitive. But then a few years later I took some black college presidents over there.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: College President of Texas Southern, President of Fisk and President of Lincoln, and we also, [00:37:00] by that time, we met with them, same people, you know the leadership.



**Pitts: Sure.**

Burke: The President of Texas Southern had been, really was interested in cultural things and intercultural things, but also he was interested in urban education.

**Pitts: Okay.**

Burke: Higher education, because he had an urban school in Texas, he wanted to learn. And we found some things very fascinating and transferable, we were up in a university up in the north in Israel (Haifa). Anyway, I did that, and when I went to work for the National Council of Churches it was a different experience.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: It was a different experience because they were interested in solving the peace issue. They had a task force [00:38:00] —they did not call it that but that is what it was. It was a combination of people, leadership, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, the high ranking people. There were about fifteen of us I guess and the National Council of Churches. But before we went over there, the Jewish organizations in New York came to us, the leadership came to us and told us we should not go.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: We said, “Why not? We have churches there, and it being the Holy Land for everybody.”

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: But they argued with us, and we went anyway and we came back and we told them what we heard, did not satisfy them, but life went on.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: What I wanted to tell you was when I went there with them, the National Council of Churches, when I got to Israel, [00:39:00] we had been in Jordan and we had been in Egypt and we had been in Syria, and we had been to Athens because you had to go up to Athens to come down back into Israel because there was a no-fly zone.

**Pitts: Yeah, yeah.**

Burke: From one side of the corner to the other. The Middle East is so complex.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: It is very, very complex. But it was very educational. When I got off the plane in Israel and I walked down the plank to the ground, they pulled me out of the line. There were only four people, [00:40:00] I think, no three people, that were black in this group and one of them was Sonia Francis

from the Episcopal Church who later became the head of Information...

**Pitts: I remember her.**

Burke: You knew Sonia. Anyway, they pulled me aside and I said, "What is this about?" And they said, "You just come with us. Do not say anything."

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Well, you know, it is the soldiers.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: They put me in a van and the rear of the van was open and there was a guy standing there with an AKA, and I am sitting at a table with an interrogator.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: What are you here for? Why are you here? All kinds of stuff, they asked me the same question several different ways. I know why he pulled me off.

**Pitts: Why did he pull you off?**

Burke: Well it had something to do with my pigmentation.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: And the fact that my passport [00:41:00] showed I had been in the Arab world.

**Pitts: Right, okay.**

Burke: So I had to be the enemy.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: So this guy kept asking me these questions and I was just sitting at a card table and he said – well why are you here? I said – I am here to see Teddy Kollek [ph]. You know Teddy Kollek? Teddy Kollek was the Mayor of Jerusalem. They stopped the interview right there, and they released me and I was able to transport over to where you get your luggage.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: When I got my luggage they had tore the luggage open and it was all over.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: The only people whose luggage they opened up were the people of color. Interesting. In

explanation, because I talked to Mayor Teddy Kollek the next day, and he said, “How you doing?” And [00:42:00] I said, “Well, they gave me a hard time coming in.” I told him, and he said, “Well you know that is the way policeman are.” He dismissed it.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: I think he was glad that I did not get roughed up.

**Pitts: Right, right [laughter].**

Burke: I was too. That was another thing. I was treated quite differently this time all the way around because I had been in those Arab countries and because I was black.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: The other thing was there was a black group in Chicago who called themselves the Real Jews.

**Pitts: Right. I remember them.**

Burke: Black Jews. Remember them?

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: Alright they had gone over there and grabbed up some land, and the land is very important to the Israelis.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: They said that they were the Real Jews and they were going to organize and push these other people out. It was the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Anyway it worked, [00:43:00] and we spent time with them. I went over just to hear what they had to say, what they were about, and that made me an authority on them, but also that getting off the plane with the dark glasses, a trench coat.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. Never again, huh.**

Burke: That was just bad.

**Pitts: We are going to take a break for a minute.**

Burke: Okay.

**Pitts: Kenyon. I wanted to just let you know though the Black Hebrews, one of the Founders**

**of it married my neighbor, so I know that group well. Anyway [laughter]. Lorraine Marshall [ph].**

Burke: You know, I know one of those guys married a guy I went to school with in Cleveland too, and he called me one day from Cleveland and said, “What can I do?” And I said, “Man, I do not know.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: I said, “I have been there. So just be careful, that is all.”

**Pitts: We are going to take a break.**

Burke: Okay.

**Pitts: And we will come back, and thank you a lot Kenyon.**

**[Part Two]**

**[00:00:00]**

**Pitts: Helpful and helping me understand your history and to see how you really were nurtured and groomed as an Ecumenist, early in your life and how that impacted who you are. Couple of questions I wanted to ask you about your life. One is – how did you meet Dorothy? And then – what actually happened?**

Burke: Well, Dorothy and I went to Glenville High School, which was the high school in town where the Jewish people lived.

**Pitts: Okay. Right.**

Burke: At that time it was the one high school in the state that had such a scholastic rating that to get into Ohio State and other schools you did not have to take what is now called the SAT.

**Pitts: Okay. [00:01:00]**

Burke: There was something like a psychological test. I do not know what they call it now. They just said if you went to Glenville you did not have to do this. But the Jewish Community always had a very high value on education as you probably know. And the other thing that has not been said often but I said it many times, is that every twenty years in the Twentieth Century, Jewish and black communities exchanged real estate in most metropolitan communities in this country.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: They changed real estate about every twenty years. That did not just happen in Cleveland. That happened in Detroit, it happened in Houston, it happened in Atlanta, it happened all over. I was exposed to that. That was interesting thing to see. It was also interesting that the Jewish

Community really felt [00:02:00] an abrasion when I would say that.

**Pitts: Right, I can imagine.**

Burke: I say it that way, but I was trying to inform, I was not trying to comfort anybody.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Does that answer your question?

**Pitts: No. How did you meet Dorothy?**

Burke: How did I meet Dorothy?

**Pitts: Yeah. You went to the same school...**

Burke: We were in the same Spanish class in high school.

**Pitts: Oh okay.**

Burke: She is a year behind me in school and I knew her but she used to complain that I was looking on her paper.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: We did not go out. And the person that introduced her to me was a longtime friend called Arthur Grace, and he lived across the street from us. Arthur introduced me to Dorothy standing in front of the PG Cleaners on A Hundred and Fifth Street.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: East A Hundred and Fifth Street [00:03:00] in Cleveland, Ohio. I went off to Bowling Green, and I came back and she was graduating, and I told her I wanted a picture of her graduation, and she gave me a picture and she thought I was going to give it back.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. And you kept it didn't you?**

Burke: She tells this story. I took that picture.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: So she gave me the picture. So I just started going to see her, and we just got together. Dorothy and I liked each other's company. We came out of different traditions. Her family's faith tradition was Baptist, maybe Holy Roller.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: No, her mother was in Holy Roller, father went to the Prestigious Baptist Church [00:04:00] called Antioch in Cleveland, Revered McKinney was the pastor.

**Pitts: Oh yeah, McKinney.**

Burke: Dorothy and I just hit it off. And her parents came out of North Carolina. Her father was in World War I. His father was a horse trader.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: In Lumberton, North Carolina.

**Pitts: Wow okay.**

Burke: Which we will get Lumberton later, during this.

**Pitts: Right. [Laughter].**

Burke: My parents were college educated, and it was a different class. We lived on the same street, about three blocks, less than half a mile, apart. We just got along. We understood each other and appreciated and respected, from the beginning respected. That is how I met Dorothy. [00:05:00] We finally got married and most people did not think it would work because the families were not friendly.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: There was a class thing. But it was no class thing with us, we just got along. That is how I met Dorothy.

**Pitts: I was told that Dorothy was upset when you went to the March on Washington in 1963.**

Burke: Oh yeah.

**Pitts: And some of us did not even know you were there. So tell us first about Dorothy getting upset, but also you going there, and why did you go?**

Burke: Well, a lot of black people and white people were scared to death of what was going to happen at the March on Washington. There were rumors there would be riots in the streets, there would be burning buildings, it was all kinds of stuff like that. I decided to go. I thought [00:06:00] I should go. I just knew that there was something here that just was not right, and I just had to be there. I did not go there to show off. I went there to make a presence, and I had learned that the presence makes a difference.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: A lot of my friends, white and black, said to me, they did not call themselves black then, it was Colored or Negro. If you were really dignified you were a Negro.

**Pitts:** [Laughter]. You said you were dignified when you were a Negro.

Burke: Yeah, that labeling was such. I went, and you are right, Dorothy did not come out of this social justice stuff, Dorothy was meat and potatoes and hard work.

**Pitts:** [Laughter].

Burke: Their father educated himself, named himself.

**Pitts:** Oh he named himself.

Burke: Named himself. [00:07:00] He was a family of twelve people, several sets of twins, he was one of the twins and they did not give him a name.

**Pitts:** They did not give him a name?

Burke: So five years old he named himself Thomas.

**Pitts:** [Laughter].

Burke: Thomas McIntyre.

**Pitts:** How come they did not give him a name?

Burke: They did not think it was necessary. I guess there were so many siblings running back and forth and all, and so he named himself and he taught himself. He and his brothers who had moved North had taught himself to read, and they had spoken perfect English and their diction was always clear.

**Pitts:** Wow.

Burke: They would play games like sitting up at night with the dictionary challenging each other on names. This is when they were working in the North around Pittsburgh and probably some of them in them mines and in the steel mills. But [00:08:00] Dorothy and I came out of a whole different tradition.

**Pitts:** Yeah.

Burke: But that did not make any difference to us.

**Pitts:** Sure.

Burke: That was a true story, and she was not tickled to death about my advocacy, turn into advocacy from me going to be a psychologist. She did not dance in the street over that one. I said Dorothy I can make more money. And I could obviously make more money than if I had stayed and just been a counsellor or a psychologist.

**Pitts: Sure, sure.**

Burke: That is how I met Dorothy.

**Pitts: Kenyon, in terms of your education, you have had at least three degrees. First of all why did you go in the Air Force? And then why did you actually see the need to go to college and get those degrees?**

Burke: Oh okay I can tell you that. Everything has a story.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: When [00:09:00] I was a little boy, I must have been in grade school, an immigrant family moved in who escaped the terror in Germany, and there was an adolescent there that lived in that house, and he asked me one day – what are you going to do when you grow up? I said, “I am going to have a Ph.D.” And he did not know what it was, and he said, “What is that?” I said, “I do not know, but I know I have to get one.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: And that is actually what I said.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Then later I found out that we had to get more education then the next person. I was trained in the tradition that we had to run faster, jump higher, shoes had to be shined, fingernails clean. We had to bring more to the table. Another example of this. [00:10:00] I was working for the State Rehab Commission in Newark, New Jersey, and a group of young white people there, one of them was Jewish, and two were women who were nurses, they had their undergraduate degree. Anyway, they had scouted around to where to get a Master’s Degree in Counselling. Well, they found a program that was, I would say, about ten to fifteen minutes from downtown Newark at Seton Hall University, which we live near now. They came back all excited about this program. We got this program at Seton Hall University right down the street and I said – well I am going over to Columbia, [00:11:00] which was like an hour’s ride to New York. They said, “Why? Why you doing that?” I said, “Because we have to bring more to the table.” I told them that. “You may be able to get by with a Seton Hall degree.” Which, at that time, Seton Hall was not considered that great academically.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: Scholastically. So, I said, “But I have to have more. I have to go to a well-named, prestigious institution.” So, I went over there to Columbia. That is how I got a Master’s in Counselling / Psychology, specialized in Vocational Counselling. Then later on I was working, and Dr. Sam Proctor the great theologian and educator and [00:12:00] personal friend was, at that time, he was on the faculty of Rutgers University School of Education. He said to me, one night in the fraternity, he said, “Kenyon come on down and get your doctorate.” And I said, “Sam.” See we



were close enough for me to say Sam.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: So I said, "Sam I cannot do this. I am flying all over the world with these jobs. They are very demanding. When I stop working, four people stop eating." Because in those days the women did not work.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: He said, "Come on down." So he came back to me again and said, "Come on down. You come on down here." So, I said, "I do not want to go through all of that, taking the [00:13:00] graduate exam and all that. I do not have time to do that Sam." I was working two or three jobs, I was saying all this stuff, reciting which made no impression on him at all.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: I realized when I started this that was not the route to take but I had to finish the sentence.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: I went down. And that is how I got it. He just cleared the way. Dr. Proctor was responsible for more blacks getting their doctorates than anybody in the history of the university.

**Pitts: Right. That is right.**

Burke: That was one of the reasons they brought him there. But at the same time he was being Pastor of Abyssinia in New York as you probably know.

**Pitts: Okay.**

Burke: That [00:14:00] is how I got those degrees.

**Pitts: That is great.**

Burke: I knew that education would make a difference.

**Pitts: Yeah, and it did, and you did a tremendous job once you did it. You were talking about the history of the Episcopal Church, and you also were mentioning the issue in terms of West Indians who came to the Episcopal Church in your community. Tell us a little bit about the dynamics, the challenges, and some of the concerns that were going on.**

Burke: The West Indian people did not have the same experience that blacks did in this country. I mean they had a different path, it was a different history. But they were sent here by the Episcopal Diocese in the Islands to get training because all the Seminaries were here. [00:15:00] The closest ones were in the United States. But they were trained with the promise, the condition, that they would not come back to the Indies.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: They would not come back to the West Indies.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: Because that would upset the hierarchy, the white hierarchy in the Church in the Islands. When they came with the West Indian accent, very British as you probably know, it developed a hierarchy in the black Clergy in the United States. The West Indians were viewed with a greater—they were here, and those blacks who were trained and ordained in this country were seen as the second class.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: Yeah, and so that was a struggle in itself and that tension was, [00:16:00] you can imagine how if you are looking for a church and you come from the West Indies, and you are American raised black, or African-American if you want to use that, you can see that would create a little tension.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: That is just an aside but that was the world, that was the way world operated, that was the way the church operated. That is the history. Do you remember we used to say in the Division of Church and Society—if it does not have a reason it has a history.

**Pitts: Right, right. You used to say that.**

Burke: And I would welcome with all my friends saying that, but it is true. I learned that from Dean Kelley, who was on the staff, he used to say that all the time. Okay can we move?

**Pitts: Yeah, let us move on because also one of the things you did not mention is the issue of the NAACP. You served staff of the NAACP, you served staff of the [00:17:00] Urban League. Can you say a little bit about those two positions, if you feel comfortable?**

Burke: Okay, okay. I was working at ADL, and because I was the black, when a group of luminaries in New York City decided to have a memorial to honor Ralph Bunche before he died, they put this high-powered group together.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Well, of course the ADL sent me.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Instead of one of their top people. I was middle management.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: So, while doing that I met the person that chaired that committee, [00:18:00] who was Jackie Robinson. Sitting across the table was Roy Wilkins. And the head of the NAACP Urban League at that time was Whitney Young, executive director of the National Urban League. Those are the people I was facing, the big leagues.

**Pitts: Right. [Laughter].**

Burke: I got to meet these folks, and one day I was on an elevator with Roy Wilkins's Assistant, Dr. John Morsell, who was an Associate Executive at the NAACP. He was on an elevator. He looked at me and said, "Kenyon, rather than come to our convention and give a civil rights speech, why don't you come and help our young people?" I said okay. He said, "They are complaining that their word does not get out to the national body." [00:19:00] The structure of the NAACP was that they have what I would call an adult NAACP, and then they have a youth division. And these two groups held their conventions consecutively. Not this way.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Not together.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: But like this.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: So the young people were saying: "What we are doing and what we are interested in never gets out. Nobody knows what we are doing." So he said, "Why don't you come and help us with their communication problems?" I was full time at the ADL, doing fairly comfortable.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: And I wound up giving a week at the NAACP Convention as a volunteer for five or six years, wherever they met. They put me on [00:20:00] the night security patrol for the youth once. That was my baptism. You know you go into a place.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. Right.**

Burke: You have to have a baptism when you're new to an organization.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Man, those youngsters ran me up all night long up and down those halls. Anyway.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: I taught them how to write, how to hold a press conference, how to write press releases, and the way I did it was because we had all the media—they met over here in the press room, the media were meeting here.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: I got the media people to come and hear their stories. The black writers (reporters), they are all gone now that were the first ones on the *New York Times*, but they were there. So I became a fixture because it took [00:21:00] the young people out of the hair of the old folks, the adults I should say.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: I only did that security thing one year.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: But it was a good experience for them, because later on some of them became journalists. Then when I was working at Planned Parenthood, I took my staff over to the Youth Division and gave them sex education information.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: They were walking around with something—I was *Planned* buttons. Somebody else in the room had one of them too. We will not mention who that is. Anyway, I did that, I took what I had and I took it over to them for education purposes. In fact every place I went, I took them to help them. [00:22:00]

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: When Roy Wilkins retired, which was a great struggle, when he retired as head of the NAACP it was the end of an era. They had a change and Mildred Bond Roxborough, who was a lifelong executive over there at the NAACP, had worked with Thurgood Marshall.

**Pitts: Thurgood Marshall.**

Burke: Yeah, she worked for Thurgood Marshall. Anyway, she said, “Kenyon we have a reorganization over here and we have a position over here, a new division. We are setting up the program division. Mr. Hooks is coming on, and we would like to have everything in place when he gets there.” I went and interviewed [00:23:00] with Ben Hooks in a hotel room. It was a hurried up thing. It was quickly arranged. And I said, “Well I really cannot turn this down, and you do not get an opportunity to be at that level like this.

**Pitts: Sure.**

Burke: “In the movement.”

**Pitts: Sure.**

Burke: I went over there for two years, and I set up their program division and lost most of the friends I had over there.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Because I went from volunteer to staff.

**Pitts: Staff, right.**

Burke: Which was a terrible thing. I knew enough about organizations that you do not go from volunteer to staff. In fact I used to give lectures on that, advising against such a move.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And seminars on that concept. Anyway, I went over there for two years and that was quite an experience. Also, it had the elements of the black Church experience and the union experience. If you want to survive in other organizations, you had to understand the ethos [00:24:00] of the union, that movement, but you also had to have the understanding of the black Church culture, which I had seen from a different...

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: Point before, just as a casual thing. I was there for two years. That was really something. I was on the road about forty to fifty percent of the time. That was the worst job I ever had.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: It was difficult.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: Because talk about folks resistant to change.

**Pitts: Oh yeah.**

Burke: They were really. So being a change agent, you know. So I left them. I think I left them to go Planned Parenthood.

**Pitts: Yeah and that is what I wanted to ask you – why did you go to Planned Parenthood?**

Burke: Because it was a good job over there and paid well.

**Pitts: What did you do?**

Burke: I was Community Affairs Director. I was in charge of [00:25:00] helping the affiliates work

with multicultural communities. For example in Newark we had a Planned Parenthood clinic there. They did not call it that, but that is what it was. We spoke five different languages. Additionally, the youth and college program was under my responsibility.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: Right in the Ironbound section of Newark.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: We had that. We had Portuguese, French, Spanish, and English obviously, and there was another group. This person had (*inaudible*) this competency of five different languages. And I showed Planned Parenthood operations how to do this. Also you have to remember this was right at the edge of the high point of the Civil Rights Movement.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: And I had all of this experience with the Civil Rights Organizations and that was helpful. **[00:26:00]** My mother had worked for Planned Parenthood in Cleveland.

**Pitts: Oh wow.**

Burke: She was in charge of a mobile clinic, and they would say: "Monday I am going to be in this project. Tuesday I am going to be on this street." It was like this.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: She was in charge of their community outreach people.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: I saw women's rights as a social justice issue.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: To me, the women's thing was always a justice thing with me because I remember my mother saying, "If you want to go into social work, just know that men get all the good jobs."

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: She told me that while I was still in undergraduate school.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: The social work thing I thought I was going to do, but it was not convenient.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: That was how I got there. [00:27:00]

**Pitts: That is wonderful. Kenyon, a couple of things I wanted to just also lift up. One of the things I realized when I came to the Council is that you were a prolific writer. You wrote an article every week or every month.**

Burke: Every other week in 102 newspapers.

**Pitts: Every other week. And what was the article? What were you writing about? Tell us about that.**

Burke: Working at that national level I ran into a lot of people, international.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Flowing out of that, taking the publishers to Israel, I became on a first name basis with all the major black publishers. They considered me part of their community.

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: I would go to their conventions and became a regular participant. [00:28:00] Dr. Carlton Goodlett, the President of that NNPA [National Newspaper Publishers Association].

**Pitts: Garth Reeves was one of the ones.**

Burke: That is right. He was in that group, because he was the publisher of *The Miami Times*. In fact, I used to use his paper as a paper of record for the articles I wrote. It went out to over 102 papers, and every other week. It was Community Affairs. The way I got into this was Carlton Goodlett, Dr. Carlton Goodlett.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: He had been the president and I met him on several occasions, and we got to be friendly. I was sitting in his home in San Francisco one evening and he said, "Kenyon, you know, you ought to be writing for us." I said, "Carlton, I do not know." I had that whole thing that I gave Dr. Proctor. Anyway he said, "You [00:29:00] ought to be writing for us. You ought to be telling us what we ought to be thinking about." That is what he told me. I said, "I do not have time." I went home and I said to myself, "Dummy."

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: "You have been offered an opportunity to be a syndicated columnist and you are talking about 'you do not have time.'"

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: So I wrote that column, and I would write anything about social justice community issues. I have some documents I am leaving here at the seminary, some of the articles I wrote. Actually the issues are not too different from what we are facing now. The whole thing about sex education and the whole thing about abortion, education and the need for education, the need for fairness in the workplace, all of this stuff. So every other week, I would do this. And I stopped doing that when I went to work for the Council [00:30:00] because the Council was very demanding.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: I was writing, and now I started writing things for the Council because it would benefit the Council's constituency and leadership, and the advanced programs that we had. I had to tell the world what we were doing, because the cardinal rule is if people ask you what you are doing and it is budget time, you are in trouble.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. Yeah. One of the things I want to do is transition into the Council.**

Burke: Yeah let us do that.

**Pitts: As we begin to transition, I just wanted to have you reflect on what was going on prior to your coming to the Council. Because you remember that James Forman, Farman (*name unresolved*) went to Riverside Church, and that whole movement, you were engaged in that, and there was this whole movement for reparations [00:31:00] and empowerment. So tell us a little bit about what was going on during that period in the churches. Because when you came to the Council, that was the tail end of that whole process and it was very hot. As a matter of fact Farman used to, I mean Forman used to come to your office.**

Burke: That is right.

**Pitts: And sit in your office and deal with some of the issues and strategies.**

Burke: And be upset.

**Pitts: Right, but tell us about that whole process because people in the church really need to understand the fermentation. Because as you said some of the same issues that are being faced today in terms of Black Lives Matter and other things were being faced during that problem and during that time in a much more intentional way.**

Burke: The Churches, some of the Protestant Churches were called to task beginning with Martin's letter from Birmingham. A lot of northern parts, people came down, the northern Churches came down [00:32:00] in response to his call. It opened up a chasm of other folk who were feeling that they were not going to get change the normal way, they would have to do it a different way. They would have to protest, they would have to do other stuff. The Council, which was formed in 1950 in Cleveland, had most of its major headquarters, and the Mainline Protestant Churches were in this building at eight...

**Pitts: Four seventy-five.**



Burke: Four seventy-five Riverside Drive. The United Methodists were there and Church World Service was there, the Lutherans in Midtown, [00:33:00] but there were Presbyterians, United Methodists.

**Pitts: United Church of Christ?**

Burke: United Church of Christ had one of their unions on there on the boards, and also Reformed Church of America was there, the AME Zion people had offices there.

**Pitts: And American Baptist MMBB.**

Burke: And American Baptist, that is right. They were there. And they were really rattled by this, they were rattled by a lot of things, but where were they in all of this racism stuff and empowerment stuff. Those words were very threatening to the Protestant community because there was an establishment like NCC in this country until not too long ago.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: [00:34:00] When I arrived, the person I followed had fallen from grace.

**Interviewer: Louis Walker.**

Burke: Louis Walker. He did a lot of things that made them upset, but he also left a two hundred and fifty thousand dollar deficit. They did not tell me about that when I interviewed for the job.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Which I had to pay off.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Which I did. I think they were floundering around on how to respond. They had this thing called, I think that is when they set up the Division of Church and Society.

**Pitts: Right, exactly.**

Burke: They did not have that vehicle. They created this thing called a Division of Church and Society, which would have staff, and representatives on the different units would usually come from their National [00:35:00] Desks.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: They used to call it the National Desk in the Episcopal Church, the National Desk in the Presbyterian Churches and other churches. American Baptist followed that pattern.

**Pitts: Baptist.**

Burke: That is right down in...

**Pitts: Valley Forge, PA.**

Burke: When these people met, they put together this vehicle, they thought it would answer all these questions about the church and what their role was, and I think they were very sincere, some of them were schematic, were scheming people, but I think the founders, I think they were very sincere. They thought that would handle it. But Lou Walker was in there and he ran up a deficit like I said of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the process. And it was mandatory that you pay. So I paid, but he lost his job. I came in, and it was a hostile [00:36:00] place just to come into the office at that time.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: Not only come into the building, but to come into the office. I had a nice office, a big office and everything, beautiful view of Riverside Park and the Hudson. There was a lot of unreadiness, now on the part of the communions that were in that building but also on the staff because their lives were involved and they did not know what their jobs were going to be. And the staff had picked out who they wanted to be the Director, I believe it was a woman out of Milwaukee, and they had it all sealed up.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: But, a friend of ours, Rev. Maynard Catchings, still of the UCC (the United Church of Christ), came in to a meeting that I was having at the NAACP and the president came, the President [00:37:00] of the National Council of Churches, Dr. Bill Howard.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: He came with a black minister, Dr. M. William Howard. He was working on the staff of the Reformed Church of America, but he was really a member of American Baptist. He came with another fellow who was in our fraternity, Sigma Pi Phi (the Boulé), and one of them worked for the Council, and he said, "Dr. Howard, you ought to look at Kenyon. He could do this job. He would do a good job for you." For us, because he was working up there too. Dr. Howard went back to the Council and told the General Secretary, who was seriously considering another person for that position, "I found a person, and here he is." That is how I got a job. Now I come into a staff that is angry that their person did not make it.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And [00:38:00] their whole future is shaky, and I come in with my style, which meant in about three weeks there was an attempt for a staff coup [sound] to get rid of me.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Which we dealt with with no problem.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: That was really because my administrative assistant had said she was scared to death about what was going to happen because her job was at risk.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: I said, “Not to worry. They do not understand I just came out of the trenches.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: “I have been at ADL.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: “I have been at the NAACP, I have been at Planned Parenthood, not to worry.”

**Pitts: [Laughter]. And you did a tremendous job.**

Burke: That was the end of that.

**Pitts: And you did a tremendous job. Tell us about your first meeting with the Episcopalians because again, the Episcopal Church was a very strong and prominent [00:39:00] church and became more engaged when you came on board. Tell us about your first meeting and how that happened.**

Burke: Well when I came in, that was a time when most of the people in the U.S. Senate were...

**Pitts: Were Episcopalians.**

Burke: Were Episcopalians.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: The woman who was in charge of Church and Society, I cannot remember her name, I think she was just so happy, she was very excited that I was on board at the Council because the NCC did not have any senior people who were Episcopalians in the hierarchy of the staff. So I came—here I was, this Episcopalian, and I was black.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: She was so tickled to death about me and I tried all night long [00:40:00] to try to remember her name last night. Anyway she invited me down to meet with the leadership of the Episcopal Church, at Eight Fifteen Second Avenue in New York. So went down and she gave this beautiful introduction to me and had me walking on water and all of this. I got up and I said, “I am so delighted to be here. Thank you. It is a great honor to meet with you, and I am proud to be an Episcopalian,” and all that. I said, “But I have a serious problem.” They said, “What?” I said,

“Because when I look at the budget of the National Council of Churches, and I see what the Methodists give, and the Presbyterian support, and the Lutherans for this unit that I am in charge of, then I look at our [00:41:00] support and I am embarrassed.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: And it had been called to my attention at the NCC. I had only been there three weeks. Man, they were gnashing their teeth.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: People were squirming in their chairs, because this was not the kind of the thing they came to lunch for.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: I did that. And of course they significantly increased the support of this unit after that. They gave me a little in the beginning but the next budget around it was substantial, it was significantly more.

**Pitts: Yeah. We are going to have to stop now but let me also just prime the pump a little bit as we move again to the next phase of this. That is that there is now [sound] an American-African Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.**

Burke: Yep. [00:42:00]

**Pitts: Those conversations that were held years ago with Earl Neil and Howard Lewis and Fred Williams.**

Burke: Bishop Williams.

**Pitts: Fred Williams and some of the other folks in that area about getting to this point was very exciting and dynamic and you led a lot of that discussion.**

Burke: That is right.

**Pitts: I would like you to talk a little bit about that, and maybe we can break now and come back, but just to keep that on your mind if you want to do it now we can.**

Burke: Let me do it now.

**Pitts: Okay.**

Burke: Then I can...

**Pitts: Yeah talk a little bit about that because there was so much going on in terms of anti-racism and your building and your organizing that whole effort in a lot of different ways.**

Burke: Alright. Let me explain the structure of the National Council of Churches.

**Pitts: Okay.**

Burke: I think that is a start there. The National Council of Churches had thirty-two member denominations [00:43:00] of the Mainline Protestant Churches in this country. That meant about forty-two million Christians. These people came together in this ecumenical effort to deal with the other world outside the church, with society. Now what they needed when they put together the Council, they had these different units, they had these three units as I recall, four, it was Church World Service; Education Division; my division and one other one.

**Pitts: Faith and Order I think.**

Burke: Yes. Okay, Faith and Order. But what happened was, let me see, they had this structure together and then they said each Church tried to [00:44:00] deal with this racism individually but they came together collectively on this issue. Alright they also saw this as an opportunity to cover them when they were trying something daring in social justice across the board, not just racial justice but racial justice was the focus. They came together, and then what happened was their constituencies back in the countryside started complaining about all this liberal stuff that was coming out of it.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: Well, the liberals within these denominations were being attacked not only from within their own constituency but they were being [00:45:00] attacked on the media.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: *Sixty Minutes*, a TV program, did a job on the National Council of Churches, I mean criticized them for meeting with these communists and having all of this. I guess what happened, the National Council of Churches served as a cover so they could do this. Okay. Now the other dynamic that was going on was not only was the Council being attacked, I told you later the Jewish Community was not pleased with them either.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: But this country was moving to the Right. And remember now we are talking about 1980 that is when President Reagan became President. Now what happened at that time was the National Council of Churches produced a document called [00:46:00] *The Remaking of America*. Now that document came out of the Division of Church and Society.

**Pitts: Right. [Laughter].**

Burke: I was there when they put it together. I helped a lot on it.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: I edited a lot of it, I wrote some of it. And there were the Conservatives in the Protestant movement moving on us, trying to move, trying to diffuse this social justice entity.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: That was making their life uncomfortable. Now in addition to that, there were six historical black Churches that were members, and they were members and they provided the Council cover so they would not be called racists, because they were included you see. The National Council of Churches was— [00:47:00] what I found very interesting was when I went to the National Council of Churches I had an image of them being this big white liberal organization.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And when I got there I found out they did not have a racial justice policy statement.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: On what was supposed to be a very important issue to them.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: A policy statement about all kinds of stuff including the dog catcher almost, and they did not have it. Now there was a reason they did not have it. Because they did not want to do it, they did not want to face it. So now that was the environment it started out with, so I think we ought to stop now.

**Pitts: Okay. Great. Thank you Kenyon.**

**[Part Three]**

**[00:00:00]**

Unidentified Male: And this is number three. Let us see what we have. Tyrone can you talk for a second?

**Pitts: Yes. This is the third session of an interview with Dr. Burke at Virginia Theological Seminary. Okay?**

**Well Kenyon we are back and this is our third session here at Virginia Theological Seminary on March 8, 2016. As I was reflecting on the National Council of Churches I just want to do a summary of your experiences at the National Council. And then I would like you to not only respond to this whole new movement that you were a part of, but to engage in dialogue with me about what really happened and what was going on during this period. Because one of the things that I am very clear about is that in a real sense these were the golden years of the National Council of Churches in the U.S. [00:01:00] And Kenyon you began your tenure at the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States in 1980, and you retired in 1994.**

Over the fourteen years of your tenure, at the NCC you were able to transform the Division of Church and Society from a fledgling, dysfunctional social justice department into one of the most transformational and visible departments of social justice in denominational life. Division of Church and Society over these fourteen years became one of the most recognized, sought after and effective departments of social justice in both the National Ecumenical Movement and in the movement in the United States. It became to many the agency that denominations turn to engage in social justice work when they needed a cover and needed the support to do what they wanted to do in their own shops. [00:02:00] You also did this in a consensus model where you had National Denominational Leaders come together and those National Leaders actually agreed on something.

Burke: [Laughter] Yes.

Pitts: And after they agreed on it they were able to move on it and really be effective in their ministries. These National Leaders engaged in every meaningful social justice issue that affected poor people, racial minorities, women, children and the environment throughout the world. You, as you said earlier, you began with a deficit of over two hundred and fifty thousand dollars and you created a viable entity, debt-free, and engaged people involved in social justice in every spear of life. Every major social justice issue that confronted U.S. society in the 1980s was responded to by the Division of Church and Society and then later [00:03:00] the Prophetic Justice Unit. In a real sense, as I said earlier, these were the golden years. There was nothing like it that ever happened before in the NCC.

Burke: That is true.

Pitts: As a result of that, the NCC's name became a brand for people who were movement people and other people fighting for justice and they really galvanized through the working group process to support the work and the National Council supported the work that they were doing. And there were sponsored related movements.

Burke: Yeah.

Pitts: Which we will talk about.

Burke: Yeah.

Pitts: And there are other groups and other issues that we will talk about. So I just want you to begin talking about, first of all let us start with – is this a fair analysis of what happened during your tenure at the NCC.

Burke: Yeah the only thing I would question that you said, that these were the golden years, I would put a caveat with these were the golden years for advocacy, [00:04:00] social justice and advocacy.

Pitts: Okay.

Burke: See people will refer to the earlier years in the National Council of Churches when they had a lot of money and they did not feel threatened, the denominations funded a lot of things. As the

country began to move to the Right, the funds started to dry up, and not only across the board, but it actually happened in our unit. You mentioned that I inherited two hundred and fifty thousand dollar deficit.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Which I paid off.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Paid off I think it was forty thousand dollars a year at a time.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Out of the program budget. Now, in addition to that, the General Secretary made a move on me that I did not understand until it was completed. She encouraged one part of the United Methodist Church to reduce their donation [00:05:00] or support in the amount of two hundred thousand dollars, and did it in a very crafty way. Much of this, when we were doing all of this and having all the success, the enemies were not only from outside but they were from inside.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Because there was a concerted effort to defund what we were doing.

**Pitts: Yeah, and as I recall Kenyon, I hope this is correct – how was the funding done? Was it that there was some money from the denominations going to the general fund and then other monies going to the various departments?**

Burke: By the time I arrived at the National Council of Churches all of the funding for the Prophetic Justice Division with the exception of the corporate social responsibility/social justice program.

**Pitts: Inter-religious.**

Burke: Yeah, [00:06:00] all of that came from denominational funds that were usually out of the National Program Budget of the denominations. It did not come from the general fund, we never got any money out of the general fund. I was told that all of your money has to come from someplace else and that is where the majority of it came from. While the Presbyterians and the United Church of Christ did not pull back any money, like a part of the United Methodist Church that was funding us, that was a part. Let me put it this way, I received monies from different parts of the United Methodists.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: But two hundred thousand dollars came out of a unit that was in [00:07:00] Dayton, Ohio. I had to put all this together and pay the rent, because we also had to pay rent and we had salaries. But I felt oftentimes that I was being attacked on all fronts. I had the enemy out there who was the very conservative, and some of the bigots and those groups and racists. But also there was some



uneasiness that came from my boss, the General Secretary, stole this money from me.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And there was no way to retrieve it.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Organization here. But I think that we made hay out of straw. That is what we did, bricks out of straw. It was invigorating [00:08:00] because it enabled and empowered people all over the world in the name of social justice.

**Pitts: Yeah.**

Burke: It really did. There was a working group for every social justice desk I had in the office, so each one of them had a group of people who felt that they were oppressed, had been denied, and what they did, this empowered them, they had no way to be empowered. But here is a vehicle that you get their story out, and that is what we did.

**Pitts: Yeah, let us talk a little bit about the sponsor related movements.**

Unidentified Male: Okay can we hang on just a second? Dad, your cell phone I think is in your pocket or something is giving me feedback.

**[Part Four]**

**[00:00:00]**

**Pitts: Yeah, let us talk about the sponsored related movements, because there were sponsor related movements. What does that mean, a sponsor related movement? There are at least three of them that I knew about.**

Burke: It was an education to me too.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: As you know. Sponsor related movements were agencies that had been started by an earlier administration in earlier life of the Council. I think it was probably in the mid-1960s. They were attached to my budget. I did not have to raise money from them, but if they ran up a debt I had to pay for it.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Which was quite a surprise to me.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: I will tell you, the groups were – one had to do with the farm workers.

**Pitts: National Farm Workers Ministry.**

Burke: National Farm Workers Ministry and Cesar [00:01:00] Chavez was that, and I met with him on many things, but he did not cost us any money. The Delta Ministry was a sponsored movement that had been started in the mid-1960s, and it was in Greenville, Mississippi in the Delta. And the Churches quietly pulled their money out of it and assigned it to a sponsor related movement and attached it to the Prophetic Justice Unit. That was a surprise. I will tell you a story. I was ending up my first year as head of this unit, and I received a series of bills somewhere along in October and there was a gas [00:02:00] bill and there was a travel bill and there was a meals bill and a lot of stuff, two or three vehicles, and I did not know what they were. Well I took our administrative assistant down there, and I went down there first to find out what it was. The second time I went down there, I found out that one of the things the Delta Ministry was doing was distributing the Jackson newspaper, the black Jackson newspaper all over the State of Mississippi. They were explaining to me what they were doing and I was sitting and I said, “You mean I have a paper route?”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Because that is what it was, and they had run up a bill close to about seventy or eighty thousand dollars. [00:03:00] The minute I saw this, it was toward the end of the year, budget time, the end of the year you are closing out and all of a sudden this bill pops up. I went down there and I found out what it was, and we stopped that.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: That was something that agencies had just carried over, and the former funders had pulled out the money quietly and nobody said anything, but I was getting bills. And the other sponsor-related movement had to do with...

**Pitts: Interfaith Council on Corporate Responsibility.**

Burke: Interfaith Council on Corporate Responsibilities, and that was a very interesting thing because they actually were right next to me in the building. But I just had administrative responsibility. I did not have budgetary responsibility. These were people that were making sure that certain people got on boards of major corporations, [00:04:00] and also they would stand up at the annual meeting of the boards and challenge the practices of the corporations.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And keep them in line. That was in line with the mission of social justice, and that was very good. They did not give me any problems, but I will never forget that Delta Ministry.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: What I found out, they were giving me all this elaborate stuff, how we are helping this and

doing that, dah-dah-dah, and all of a sudden I said – we have a paper route.

**Pitts: Yeah they were set up to really deal with poverty in the Delta.**

Burke: That is right.

**Pitts: The Mississippi Delta.**

Burke: Yeah and so we had to close that one down right away. When I say right away, that did not mean I could do it today.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Because they had incurred the debt.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And the Council, meaning me.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Had to pay for it.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And I personalize [00:05:00] it because that is the way I did. I really felt that they had run a game. I really felt that. So I took that personally. I worked on that one.

**Pitts: Right. Let me ask you this: you mention a series of working groups.**

Burke: Yes.

**Pitts: And you mentioned that they were people who came together who were movement people in the areas, and also they sat with church people.**

Burke: Yes.

**Pitts: This was the first time church people not only dialogued with movement people.**

Burke: That is right.

**Pitts: But they also engaged in activities in action with movement people. It was from the bottom up but it was also dealing with denominational leadership, which was very unusual.**

Burke: Yeah, and it worked. It worked. And that is what was the surprising thing to a lot of people, because when that was set up people thought that was set up to fail. But that became a very good model because you had this inner connection between the middle management and program people

in the denominations on the working groups with the movement people, [00:06:00] the community people we called them in those days, but they were really the movement people. They would come together and come up with a policy, recommendation, a resolution, let us do this, let us do that, let us work on changing how people view Columbus Day. We had that meeting up there, Governing Board meeting up there in Pittsburgh. I recall that was one of the resolutions that came across, and next day the newspapers, Pittsburgh had this banner “National Council of Churches Accuse Columbus of Invading America.”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Stealing the land, invading. Because of, I guess, the huge Italian population in that part of country.

**Pitts: Right, right.**

Burke: I mean the phones lit up. Our public information guy got nervous. It was really funny. [00:07:00] But we hit the nail on the head on that one.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: People really began to look at how we look at Columbus Day, and his history here, and the written history that we all heard when we went to school.

**Pitts: That was in the 1980s and the struggle is still going on now as you said. Let me ask a couple of things about the working groups, because I find it fascinating, your analysis of the working groups. Because they also were self-funded. So that was another thing.**

Burke: Oh yeah, well you know why they were self-funded?

**Pitts: No why?**

Burke: It was because the middle management program people in the denominations had their own budgets.

**Pitts: Okay.**

Burke: And they had control over their own budgets. They brought money to the table. They were not included in my budget.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: They supplemented because they supported those working groups. I [00:08:00] really liked the working groups because they came prepared. They would bring things to me that were in a form that we could reshape it, edit it, and advocate it to these things, their passage to our Governing Board.

**Pitts: And sometimes those middle people were in conflict with the other people and the**

**National people in their denominations.**

Burke: No question.

**Pitts: So how did you deal with that when that happened? [Laughter].**

Burke: Let the heads crack.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: You know, if you are looking for unanimity, you do not get agreement all the time in Ecumenical business. You cannot have unity. First of all you are advocating change. Second of all you are advocating change a lot of people do not want and fear. The other thing I think you have with a model like this: they probably were the [00:09:00] most independent elements of our whole structure. They were independent because they brought some money to the table, they brought ideas, they brought concepts, they taught us a lot. They were really shielded from the top leadership, because that is the way their structures were. Most of their structures supported that. That was a beautiful mix to see. It was like what the global village is supposed to look like. Martin Luther King called it the Beloved Kingdom.

**Pitts: Ecumenical Mosaic.**

Burke: Oh yeah.

**Pitts: Let us talk a little bit about some of these working groups and some of these departments. Now there was religious liberty. Dean Kelley. Tell us about Dean Kelley and religious liberty.**

Burke: Dean Kelley was a United Methodist minister. This is the way you talked in denominations.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: You have to first identify [00:10:00] where they came from.

**Pitts: Right. [Laughter].**

Burke: But he was on our staff. The Methodists were not paying for it separately.

**Pitts: Right. [Laughter].**

Burke: I was paying a lot of the money parts of the business too. Anyway Dean Kelley was probably the foremost person in the United States on Religious Liberty, and he was in charge of Civil and Religious Liberty. He would look at the makeup of an institution that called itself a church and he would make a judgment – is this a church or isn't it a church? Is this real or is this a con game? He was very, very sensitive about people not observing religious liberty. He, and there is a Professor Tribe [sp] at [00:11:00] Harvard, his name escapes me, but the two of them put together

quite a series of Amicus Briefs, and Dean won most of them. Dean was not a lawyer, but evidently he had learned the law. He learned that process of Amicus Briefs and all that, and so he wrote them very well. He taught me a lot about religious liberty because I was for it, but I did not have to deal with it. I was dealing with all of these other things.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. These briefs went before the Supreme Court.**

Burke: They sure did.

**Pitts: He won more in the Supreme Court than anyone else did.**

Burke: They sure did. I forget his companion's name. He was good, and he helped all of our group in a way, because what happened was when they fired my predecessor they put Dean Kelley in charge [00:12:00] of the Unit. When I showed up my first day, he had the biggest smile on his face.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: I mean he was so happy to see me. And that was sincere, that was deep, because Dean was scholarly and he did not want to be bothered with all of that combat we were involved in.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: On the justice issues. But he had a sense of what we were doing, and he provided us with a knowledge and skills that we would not have had, and I do not think any other justice movement had in the country. I saw this fellow, his name is missing.

**Pitts: Is his name Hamilton?**

Burke: No it is close, but I saw him the other day, or his son, I saw his son was getting married the other day. We can go ahead.

**Pitts: Now what about Bob Jones University and Dean Kelley? [00:13:00] The Amicus Brief on Bob Jones University. Do you remember that?**

Burke: Is that a church? What was the question?

**Pitts: Whether it was a university or whether it was a church. Should it keep its tax exempt status.**

Burke: Yeah they were covering themselves by saying they did not have to pay taxes because they were a church, yet they were operating like a business.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: It was a church, and Dean finally proved that it was. Also, I remember he went out and looked at the church in Los Angeles, the one that is so controversial – the Church of Scientology. Well, that was very helpful, and we made a lot of victories in that [00:14:00] area because it called

attention to that you just could not have any kind of legislation or policy.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: That you wanted to, if you had a whim. He did that. And then there was the justice for women issue.

**Pitts: Yeah I was going to ask you about that.**

Burke: Man, let me tell you, that justice for women group did not have a voice anyplace but in the National Council of Churches. It forced the denominations to set up a women's desk in their denominations. But you see where it was coming from, it was coming from us.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: It was coming from our unit. It was not coming from them. Now some of them had it, but most of them did not, and if they did it was crumpets and tea or something that had nothing to do with justice. However, the United Methodist had a Women's Division.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: But they were very active and I stood up for them many times. I felt that from the time I was a young man. [00:15:00] I remember my mother telling me that men get all the administrative jobs in social work, so women always had to take back a second. I knew that was wrong, and I knew she told me that for a reason.

**Pitts: Right. [Laughter].**

Burke: I am trying to think, were they involved?

**Pitts: Equal pay for women.**

Burke: Well, I am trying to think, sex equity.

**Pitts: Oh yes, sex equity.**

Burke: Sex equity, I am trying to use the language now. Yes, they were involved in that, and I remember the Governing Board meeting. Why am I thinking about Pittsburgh? That is probably where it was.

**Pitts: Where it was, yeah.**

Burke: There were people—on this staff of the National Council of Churches [00:16:00] —there were people in their denomination.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Who were on the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches. There were people on the staff, and middle management people, but they had no voice.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And there was an institution called a Metropolitan Church, which had transgender people.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And they kept trying to join the National Council of Churches, and every time they made a move the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church, who was a legal (*inaudible*).

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: He and his guys figured out a way to keep these people out.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Well not membership. So in protest, at the Governing Board during the meeting, all of these people stood up silently, in the middle of the basement session program. In the middle of the agenda, just stood [00:17:00] up. And you could have dropped a pin in the room. At least two hundred and fifty people in the room. Chris Coop [ph], who was an Episcopalian, who was our environmental justice person, was an Episcopalian and a transgender person—she stood up and of course I stood up.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Now this is a social justice issue.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: People came up to me and said – why did you stand up? I said, “Now look. I am in charge of the Social Justice Unit. She is on my staff.”

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: “She is an Episcopalian. Why am I not standing up?”

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Some of things about some of the justice issues really had a common thread. If people could be as creative to include as they were to exclude folks, [00:18:00] this would be King’s Beloved Community.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Because these systems were set up to keep this group out, discount that group, stomp that



one down, cut off the rent.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: It would be just so much easier to include people.

**Pitts: Kenyon as you are talking I am thinking about all the stuff that is going on right now with justice issues with women and gender equality and all of that. And all that stuff you were dealing with back in the 1980s, it is amazing.**

Burke: Same issues.

**Pitts: Now what about the environment? You mentioned Chris Coop. What about the environmental justice issues?**

Burke: The environmental, we had Three Mile Island, had the leakage of radioactivity, and there was a big conflict going on in the country about do we keep nuclear plants, [00:19:00] or don't we keep nuclear plants?

**Pitts: Right. Right.**

Burke: Also, they were also involved in finding every time there was a major project, a government project, or a community, civic project, quote, it was always where the poor, the blacks and the poor lived. The land was poisoned, the water was poisoned. All of a sudden they are talking about how the water was being poisoned.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: In Flint. Well, listen, the bureaucrats knew when they turned the water off, the other one, that the next water was not going to be as good because it was colorful. That is not new.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: This was a justice issue. I think one of the great things that happened to me was to discover you to run our Racial Justice Desk, [00:20:00] because you were committed and you were not there to self-promote. You were there to do this job. You did your job despite all of the barriers, and people whispering behind your back and all that stuff. But you did it, you did it with honesty and clarity. And I want to thank you, because I was able to depend on you. I had to watch my back all the time, and I often thought that I was up to here with my alligators after being in the swamp. So talking about draining the swamp, I was worried about those alligators.

**Pitts: As you know Kenyon if you were not for you I would have been fired at least ten times. I think you know...**

Burke: It was not ten.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: But I could say three General Secretaries.

**Pitts: Three General Secretaries.**

Burke: Told me to fire you and I told them they have to come by me.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Tell my boss you are going to come by me. [00:21:00]

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Anyway I had support.

**Pitts: Sure.**

Burke: In some of these justice groups in the churches. I think that was very important. And what you did, when you did that audit, on your first assignment to do an audit on the National Council of Churches staff, and you came back with this document of how many pages—fourteen?

**Pitts: No it was a hundred.**

Burke: A hundred pages. Anyway, it was really embarrassing to the Council because all the blacks' jobs, almost all of them except a few people in my department and me, were in the service of the Council, and the program insisted there were white people. All the managerial, the administrative staff, they were all there, [00:22:00] the key punch operators, the typists, all that, but it was so black and white. It was the hierarchy. It was a reflection of the greater society. What you did scared our General Secretary half to death when you first showed her this stuff. But it really caused us to get a racial justice policy passed through the Council. That was the way to get the Council's backing—go the policy route. And that took a long time. It took at least two years from the time it got started within the working group until we got it through the Governing Board. When we first brought it up, we were told it did not have much continuity, and then they told us it did not have a biblical basis.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Basis was not the word. It [00:23:00] was not theologically sound.

**Pitts: Yeah. It was not theologically proven.**

Burke: Theologically. You were creative enough to go and find a Lutheran Native American out at the University of Colorado. He wrote the theological piece.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Of the Racial Justice Policy, of the National Council on Churches, which became the model for racial justice policies for all of the denominations. They were not embarrassed by it because they

could say well this is what the Council did. I can testify that as soon as that policy passed I got a call from Bishop Williams from Eight Fifteen, which was Episcopal Headquarters, and he said, “Kenyon how do we get started on getting the racial justice policy?”

**Pitts: Wow.**

Burke: How do you define, [00:24:00] prejudice, what was that?

**Pitts: Prejudice plus power, racism is prejudice plus power.**

Burke: Racism, yeah it was a definition of racism. And people had argued about that long before this, but that definition, racism equals prejudice plus power, that takes in the whole thing. You do not need to write several paragraphs, because when you said power not only did that include individuals, it included institutions. That policy, I can only think of one person in the hierarchy, or in that life, who thought it was the worst piece of legislation.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: That was...

**Pitts: Vernon Brawls [ph].**

Burke: The guy that was head of the Reformed Church.

**Pitts: Vernon Brawls, wasn't it?**

Burke: No, what was it? Arthur, I do not know. You know the tall...I cannot remember his name. We can go back.

**Pitts: Not Arie Brouwer?**

Burke: Yeah.

**Pitts: Arie Brouwer who became... [00:25:00]**

Burke: Who became the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches. That was just more than they could take. But we had it, and we did not get it easily, because finally we answered all of these objections, including theology and all of that, and the way it is formed and all of that. By that time ,Bishop Cousins, he was a Senior AME Bishop, was in the chair, and at this Governing Board meeting he stopped out of the chair.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: And said, “We have had enough. It is either we pass this, or we walk.” That meant...

**Pitts: All the black denominations.**

Burke: All the black denominations. Well the black denominations gave the Council the cover. That is how that got passed, [00:26:00] and you did the dog work on that. I took the barbs, but you got the dog work.

**Pitts: You also were the advisor and the Counselor and the one who led it through the process.**

Burke: Well I knew how to fight with a short stick.

**Pitts: [Laughter]. A few other questions I want to raise. We had a few other working groups. We had the Health and Welfare Working Group.**

Burke: Oh yeah, Health and Welfare called attention to inequities in the health system. Why do blacks and Latinos have all these diseases so early? Well it is a health issue. If you do not afford them exposure to good healthcare, then that is a justice issue. Now that was hard to get across to the National Council of Churches, because every time I said [00:27:00] health is a justice issue, they would tell me that is the Kennedy Health Bill you are talking about.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: That has been taken care of. I said – no that has not been taken care of. It was a matter of interpretation. It was ducking and dodging, but it was a matter of interpretation. Health is a major justice issue now. You hear it and you talk about the disparities, that is the new language. That is another thing about this business: you can change the name of something and give the illusion that you have made progress or change, but in essence you have not done anything but changed the name.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: Now they call it health disparities. That was not even in the vocabulary. It was the same issue.

**Interviewer: Right.**

Burke: I learned that early on, too, that this [00:28:00] language was getting in the way. It was hiding things. That is where I am at the moment.

**Pitts: What about the justice for children. You have Eileen Lindner, and Marian Wright Edelman. I mean the working group focused on that.**

Burke: Well children get very abused, not only by the health system, but the laws were not protecting them and also the daycare was not available. If a woman was a single parent and she had a family to support, she had two jobs to meet bare necessities, and could not afford expensive healthcare, because it was really expensive. We had a staff person by the name of Eileen Lindner who joined with Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund, went down to the Ford Foundation [00:29:00] and got a grant, and children became a national issue just by that.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: I would say that we stirred up a little.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: But she was very good. I mean I had good staff.

**Pitts: What about Dwain Epps in International Affairs?**

Burke: We had an International Affairs Desk, and Dwain worked with the United Nations. So we had a foot in the door there, and he was trying to get them to adopt some of the justice issues that we had already started working on. And he got shot down many times, but Dwain was very persistent, and at times tenacious.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: He did a job. He spoke [00:30:00] Spanish fluently, I will never forget that. So he was very good with the Latin-American population. Later on, after he had been there for a while he and Arie Brouwer, then the General Secretary, got to be very close. Arie was trying to get rid of me and the whole unit. So one morning I was called to Arie Brouwer's office and Dwain was sitting up in there grinning.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Arie said, "Kenyon, I decided to take over the International Desk, and Dwain will be on my staff." I said, "Welcome."

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: Just like that.

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: I was holding the door for them, and they both looked at each other because they were prepared for a fight.

**Pitts: Right. [00:31:00]**

Burke: I was so glad to get rid of this job. That amounted to ninety thousand dollars that I had to raise. He was a political enemy.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: He was on my staff. I will never forget that. And they said, "Well, then that is the meeting."

**Pitts: [Laughter].**

Burke: I got up and I left. You did not know that story.

**Pitts: I did not know that one. Kenyon, I know time is of the essence, but there are a few things I hope we can get to talk about if not this time the next time. But there was the *Remaking of America* where Ronald Reagan's policies were really destroying the nation. You were able to pull people together to respond to that in the document, that was tremendously helpful in creating...**

Burke: Yeah that was interesting and we had some strong [00:32:00] support from religious liberty people, but also people that just knew that politically this was not good for any of the liberal agenda. These folks were really out to take away most of our liberties. The Council produced, my office with my name on it, produced this document and called it *Remaking of America*. It was not long after that was published that they came at us with the *Sixty Minute* attack on us.

**Pitts: *Reader's Digest*.**

Burke: *Reader's Digest*, yeah, because that was their agenda and we had put out in printed form, very clearly, examples and exposures to what they were up to. [00:33:00] I remember that period.

**Pitts: I am sure you do. And what about the document that you produced called *They All Don't Wear Sheets* by Lenny Zeskind, who is now a national figure.**

Burke: People would say to me, they were talking about those extreme white supremacists, and the nationalist groups, and I had to remind them that some of them wore buttoned down collars. That is where the title came from. It was called *They Don't All Wear Sheets*. Lenny Zeskind worked with us on that, but that was another part, I still have a copy of that. With this kind of an agenda we were not always making friends.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: But it was fair. [00:34:00] It was fair and we tried to be fair about it. If they wanted to be Parliamentary and all of that, we had, if I did not, somebody in the unit had the skill to handle it. If they wanted to get down, and argue programmatically I could handle that. If they wanted to get in the gutter I knew how to do that, I knew dog fight.

**Pitts: Right.**

Burke: So I had been in these other organizations that would do it all the time internally. At the Council, I called on every skill I had ever learned about people.

**Pitts: And you transformed the Council. I remember the Free South Africa Movement.**

Burke: Can we do that on the next?

**Pitts: Yeah, we can do that another time, and some of the other things that were just tremendous.**

Dr. Joseph Thompson:        You have been going about forty-five minutes so it is up to you if you want to continue.

**Pitts: You ready to stop it or you want to continue?**

Thompson:    You ready to stop? But you can continue as far as I'm concerned.

**Pitts: You can tie it in if you [00:35:00] say you want to.**

Burke: I want to terminate this session.

**Pitts: Yeah, I think we need to stop.**

Thompson:    Okay, alright.

**Pitts: We do not want to wear him out.**

Thompson:    Well thank you to both of you for this excellent interview, and we will look forward to the next one.

**Pitts: Ecumenical Minority Bail Bond Fund was the other one.**

Burke: It was a lot of stuff you left off. But we got a good portion of it.

Thompson:    Yes we did. Well thank you.

Burke: I want you to know we got about three-quarters of it...