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Interviewer: Well let's start with, your name and where we are.

Rev. Bonner: Well okay, I'm Pastor B.J. Bonner, pastor of First Baptist Church College Avenue, that's our legal name but we known also as First Missionary Baptist Church. Here in the city of Russellville Alabama and I guess you'll need to know starting out how long I've been here.

Interviewer: Sure

Rev. Bonner: I been here at First Baptist College Avenue, for 22 years it'll be 23 years in April 2013. And I must say starting out that if I had to go and just kind of describe my stay here at this congregation I would have to say that it has been a wonderful voyage. I guess it's kind of like a voyage that any of the explorers would have taken whether it was from Spain to you know the Americas from Spain maybe going around the world. It's been a voyage and it's just been wonderful because of the makeup of the people, the mentality, and just the way that they are. It's been a wonderful voyage and a wonderful stay here at Russellville.

Interviewer: Well excellent, might I inquire I saw your sign out front that I think said a hundred and twenty-seven some odd years of service, so that would put this church founded?

Rev. Bonner: Well going back it really got started according to the first deed in 1884 somewhere near there abouts is when we got our start and just like a lot of your Missionary Baptist Churches you know they began to brush off of us. A lot of times they were together before they actually built the church itself and sometimes then the years may vary you know maybe a short period of time is kind of missing and then sometimes there is a long span of time that is missing in the history. So we could be 127 years plus as far as us being together as a congregation. Here in Russellville and one of the names that will come up whether it be First Baptist Russellville or First Baptist Tusculumbia or Zion Number One out of Barton, the name that will come up is Reverend W. E. Norcross, because he was the founder of this church and built the original structure and everything and had his I guess his first building which was a plank building that was done by him and from there she began to flourish.

Now the number of people that they started with had not been confirmed but I do know that shortly after there were something like 51 members solid, when they first started out around the turn of the (20th) century. Now how many of those people are relatives of people in this church we don't know, but we do know there are relatives from the original people in the church.

Interviewer: Descendants?

Rev. Bonner: Uh-huh and so a hundred and twenty-seven years been a wonderful voyage for us.

Interviewer: Fabulous, all right. Now I only assume from the project that we are doing these, it's a predominately black but I'm sure do you have good diversity if members today?

Rev. Bonner: Yes we have white members as well, as a matter of fact about a little over a month ago we had a whole white family to join we have couple more white families that are members here at this church. So we have some diversity right here in our congregation and I believe that with those members they have come out of some original families right here in Russellville too. And so it's with the history is kind of joined together even with the southern Baptist you know you have a lot of Southern Baptists in the area but when you really go back and examine it you know at the one time we was all pretty much together. I'm sure that even the moderator of our district if someone has talked with him has probably brought that fact out there that you know out of corporate Baptist association is where the muscle shoals Baptists association came out of many years ago.

Now with us being predominately black lot of times people get us mixed up with other denominations Baptists denominations especially I think you have something like 200 and some different kinds of Baptist. We are, you know how that can be some times.

Just to make it a little clearer what we are part of and had been around the time that church was founded, when the National Baptist Convention USA was pretty much put together. Course we are members of the National Baptists USA Incorporated. Then there are other Baptist that's way up there, there's the National Baptist Convention of America, see the boards which came out of us then you got the National Missionary Baptist Convention which is different, we are Missionary Baptist but we not the Missionary Baptist Convention. Then you got the progressive Baptist Convention which is also another group and then you got the National Primitive Baptist Convention <laughter> and then around the turn of the century you had the Church of God and Christ which came out of Missionary Baptist around the turn of the century.

Interviewer: Well then lets define then, what a Missionary Baptist is, what makes them different as far as believe or otherwise.

Rev. Bonner: Well the word missionary pretty much defines us, because we are a body who believes in going, not just going for the sake of mission, but going for the sake of mission but also carrying the message of Jesus Christ. You see that's our core belief. Really an example who we really are people have made us a denomination but really we are really not were just Baptist really. Because all that word Baptist brings out is the fact that we are baptized in church and we are autonomous even though we are in a district, we are in the Muscle Shoals district, we are a autonomous body and we have the right to determine what we do here in our local congregation based on what he word says. As far as holding a Baptist down, that's an impossible task.
<laughter>

Interviewer: So I've been told, well I guess this congregation in particular started in 1884, so I suppose it was really started after emancipation, or does it have roots that far back?

Rev. Bonner: Yeah, we started just shortly after the emancipation proclamation we started with 1884 and you can walk that back a little but it still had to be fresh on a lot of the people's minds then and if there wasn't there were people who were witness to or actually alive when it was given. When we was actually free emancipated so it was fresh, now there's several churches in our state convention and all of this probably is on the record somewhere it was brought together just briefly after the emancipation proclamation was given as soon as they had the freedom to go ahead and form churches you they'd do that. One church that I've pastored in Jacksonville just briefly after slavery was abolished and everything they come together they came together like 1869 was when they actually built their first building but their history goes all the way back to 1836. You know first Baptist of Jacksonville and First Baptist of Eastwood Community in Jacksonville have been friends all the way back to 1836...

Interviewer: In Mississippi

In Alabama, Jacksonville just one mile not quite a mile of the campus of Jacksonville State University

Interviewer: Okay

Rev. Bonner: Okay so that's where I was a preacher before I came here but looking at the history here, and there something that leave you hanging hen you go back and read about when they came together. There were already together somewhat and I haven't found out what that was really about. I do believe that the church is older than what it is and hopefully one day will have a clear understanding about what happened when we go back and we find some old records of something indicating that you know that there were something's going on then before they actually came and built the first structure which was just a few feet over where the school is right now.

Now one thing we did find out and I in my study of the church history at one time we had Pope, John Pope as the first Pastor, but through the study of a fellow by the name of Reverend Norcross we found out that he was the first pastor, because in his autobiography he stated that he built the church in Russellville and then was pastor for four years, then after that he recommended Pope John, through that autobiography that we found out that Norcross was the first pastor now the hundred twenty seven years was based on Pope Jones being the first pastor what we are trying to find out now is that Norcross built the church and he recommended that Pope Jones become the pastor is the church four years older than that or what if we got the time mixed up and so forth, get everything working together, and that's where we are on that right now if we read further about Norcross I think we can find out the answer to that question whether or not our history goes further than what it is really shown right now.

Interviewer: Have there been any schisms or splits in the community?

Rev. Bonner: Yes there have been schisms, splits, and so forth but we are still standing. Right now our total membership would be about 329 something like that possibly more than that usually when you just really count and want to be accurate you look at about only half of those people as really being average. We have about 329 total membership at the church right now, without splits. Just about every predominately black church in this area has come out of this church see, and so but this church is still pretty much as far as the number we've had some people to return back after the splits and the schisms all of the things that have happened over the past but I believe that its indicative of the fact that you know God's hand is you know is with this congregation. I just believe that when a body of people stay together for an extended period of time especially or whenever they stay together I believe God has a whole lot to do with that. There is a glue that you hear a lot of us talk about as pastors and that glue that we talk about is the god faith, Christ's love. I believe a lot reasons as to why we are still together now. So with the breakups or whatever has happened over the years, it usually is because of disagreements, we know where disagreements come from, we know where comes from, and so a little of that took place and some of those place that you know took out from here are still alive today, some of those churches are still there today. It has happened.

Interviewer: You mentioned there's a church, a school sorry across the way that's affiliated with the church here...

Rev. Bonner: Okay well what it is that used to be the old elementary school back when they built the first building the first building used to be called the Russellville Missionary Baptists Church, the as the first name of the church Russellville Missionary Baptists Church. It was sitting right over where you see that awning over at the church where you walk under, not the church I'm sorry, at the school next door when you go out, you're going to see where you got the thing that you walk under whatever you call that the awning type. The church was pretty much right there it was right in the what used to be the principal's office it would kind of cut right into there the original church. Well over the years when the school got together they wanted to get the school board and everything the church had its building over there when they built the block building they had the planks that and the school wanted to come in and move it that plank building and they did. From there somewhere along the way there was a fire there and there's still something missing in there when they had the fire, you know in the old plank building and everything. Somewhere along the way the church and the school had a change of property and that is why we are here now and they are over there where they are right now. There was a trade off and so even right now with the purchases that we've made here recently a portion of our property goes over a part of the way into the school lot right now, and we purchased all this back here which all belonged to the school at one time this field back here we own all that now. So and we got it because the elementary school moved out and they went on over there where the rest of the schools are so that's the deal is that we have the school and that's why we are located where we are now.

Interviewer: How old is the school?

Rev. Bonner: It's a little younger than what we are, because I assuming this I don't remember the number that relates to the school but I do know that they as housing the school in the old church building so it had to be around the turn of the century. Right in there close, a little bit before maybe.

Interviewer: So the church is and education... since its inception.

What are you trying to...

Interviewer: I was trying to... I was just thinking it was noble and interesting of course that a faith community would be involved in the education of young people.

Rev. Bonner: Yes definitely so we you know as far as looking back at records you know this church was one place where looking at the black school back then or an African American school they used to have their bachelorettes and their graduations here at the church at the old church so there was a definitely a good relationship connection to the church and the school. Also not only that Christian education, you know secular education, Christian education there has always been a part of that in this local area the best way that we can. Always try to work with the school like to help with the court program over at the school now we do our best to try to work with them and even with the Community Action Program that they have on the other end of the building now we work with them also. Now the fact that we used our basement every so often now to carry out things so there's been a good working relationship with the school and the church over the years I say that with the history and what's still happening today.

Interviewer: One of the formative periods of our Nation's History was the Civil Rights Movement, I was wondering if there was any involvement or notable incidents or what have you regarding this institution, during that period in the 1950s or the 1960s

Rev. Bonner: Well one of the people who could speak more effectively about that is gone as far as one hands experience as far as this church. His name is Dr. W. M. Ford he pastured this church here for 21 years now during the heat of the civil rights movement he was the pastor of the church but from what I understand people like Adam Stanford were involved in the ... church he was one of the school teachers in this area and as far s I know he was one of the people who was around at that time who had their of doing things back then. Then not only but was very Important and involved in keeping race relations good in that day and time and if you go and look at the school record you would find that out Adam Stamford was one of Russellville's school teachers there was at one time and he retired and I was sitting here trying to think of the other gentleman's name who was an instructor who was also a member of the church as well we would be Or T. Vaughn then the name Or T. Vaughn and you go search the school records as well he was one of the school teachers too and he was a member of the church as well around the civil rights movement and many of the members were involved in what I understand and so the

transition was as far as going from Reedtown town to Russellville High School was a pretty good transition as far as I understand. As far as the troubles that came in doing the civil rights movement I don't think it was near as bad in this particular area as compared to places Birmingham and Gadsden and Tuscaloosa and Montgomery and Dothan and so forth. It says something there about the people in this local setting.

Interviewer: Sure, that's generally the impression I get around the region and I think that's true of a lot of smaller towns and cities you know, where you can't really anonymity of a large crowd scene to instigate anything.

Right.

Interviewer: ...on either side you know, certainly not excusing anything that did or did not certainly very interesting. You said you purchased some property so there must be plans in the future for this institution.

Rev. Bonner: Yeah at sometime that's the we have to have that in our focus because regardless of who we are however we stay at some point in time we got to tip our hat and go on and I believe that by making the purchases its not only going to benefit the church now but it's going to benefit whoever's coming on later on just say we had plans we have plans to do something down there and if we don't get it done someone else later on will come and get it done whether it is family life building or just some type of assisted living home or whatever down there we have a lot of those things laid out what we had talked about but at this point and time we have not been able embark upon that and there's a reason for that now. The reason for that is in our area changes take place demographic change people leave and go to other places and so forth and then the rate of people coming in is not as great as what it as you know some time back which means you are affected by economics and what have you it'll effect churches as well lot of people don't want to hear that that's the real deal if the dollars not walking in with the members you don't have the dollars and that's one thing that has maybe slowed us up but it's not going to deter us to the point where we are not going to get anything done because we have done some things right here at this building but any purchases that we make we are making those purchases and those things here bearing in mind that whoever comes on later on will have something to work with later on when they get here.

Interviewer: I mentioned earlier that I was Catholic and the Pope has made overtures and speeches about a growing secularism he said in Europe particularly but I think in America as well I'm sure you've seen it, but I wanted to... I know among young people in this community is there, you know, do you feel that turning away from spirituality a growing of secularism that might be undermining? You know, you said the population change demographics change do you think there's maybe not a turning away from God because I think this is something that Benedict is wrong about, that the young people are not necessarily becoming Godless they are just not

feeling the need for spiritual community, or brick and mortar religious experience. What would you have to say about any of that?

Rev. Bonner: I think that the young people right now are as bright as any group of young people have been. I think one thing that deterred them a lot of times is how they are steered or directed as they are growing a lot of times in the house or in the community and then sometimes its just all of the competition that you have right now with this space age should I say post modern era that we are in right now, we've one from modern to post-modern and I think what a lot different things that we have now to challenge to the point that they are really not focused on the word of God long enough to just be able to cause to be effective in their lives, if that makes sense.

Some cases, now there's just a small but just as loving because you know they're just as loving. I'm not gonna say that they are a generation that just plain old evil I'm not gonna say that. I'm not even begin to say that because a lot of the young people that I know they hearts are just as good as a lot of the older people that had been here you know forever see so I'm not going to write them off and say they are not capable and that god is wither because the challenge is greater there are so many things so many be things out there that kind of misdirecting them. I guess I can say that there a lot of people like me and when I say like me in my age group that can't take advantage of young people by offering them things that don't really have nothing to do with church making that competition even greater you know so it's not just the young people turned away from their spirituality I think because of the boost of a lot of the things that we didn't have its becomes a temptation even for the old and so they see that as an opportunity to get away from the norm o I know that would putt... that would cause some people to maybe spin on their heads but I look at things realistically it's not just the young folks that's getting away from being spiritual and so forth it's a lot of the old people as well see. Because they get caught in the mix of things too, Going back to the young people we've had a lot of examples right here in Russellville of very capable young who are capable if you really are look at it as carrying a community on caring the country on they have that capability now I see that right here among the young folks right here in Russellville Alabama right here in our local congregation.