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Theme 4 - Churches

Patricia Calhoun:

As part of my growing up, that was very important and I think important to our community was our churches.

Edward Roby:

I went to church every day and went to church every morning and sung in the choir. I don't know what I'm singing, but I sung every morning. But we'd go to church every day, every morning we had mass and it wasn't long, but we just had a little bit.

Beryl Wainwright:

Yeah, I was baptized at Holy Cross. I was baptized everywhere. I mean, I did everything there. Confirmation, I remember that. Holy First Communion, I did all of that at Holy Cross. So I started there in kindergarten. And the kindergarten building was next to church and there were a little bitty building next to where all of the little bitty people were and the playground was outside. And then the first graders, the big kids were for us were over in the big building. So I was, I went there from kindergarten through... I think through sixth grade when I get out of sixth grade, that's all it was. Everybody at Holy Cross, everybody was Black. When I went there, I'm trying to remember, I think it was that way. All the whole time I was there and all of the nuns were white, so the nuns were white and every student was Black. So it never was an issue that was discussed, that was our life that we were living.

Interviewer:

Do you know anything about when you were a child at the time, why your parents chose to go, to send you to a Catholic school, to a private school? Do you know if there was something special about the education or...

Edward Roby:

Well, I don't think my mother, because she only went to the eighth grade. My daddy went to the 11th grade. Kind of funny, he went to 11th grade and quit. And at the time he was going to school, 11th grade was the highest you could go, but he quit the first semester. If he had stayed one more semester, he had graduated. But no, my mother never said probably because of daycare reasons. My dad went to work, brother went to work, my grandmother, I guess she went to work and nobody really to keep us. So when we got old enough, we went to school and that was more and you could stay there, until your parents picked you up or you just, everybody walked home. And the nuns, oh yeah, they were strict. But they were really, they were really very good, very good teachers and they demanded so much out of you.

Patricia Calhoun:

I knew that Jacob Fontaine had started many of the churches in Austin back in the 1800s. I did find and my uncle had been telling me that there were two churches in that neighborhood. This is Wheatville. Our family was a member of Ebenezer. My dad was a member of the Ebenezer. My mother's family was First Baptist and so they're a long history of First Baptist people dating back to my great-grandfather.

And so I grew up in Ebenezer and it was very much like as I described school, we were close knit family of people. Everybody knew everybody, everybody looked out for everybody and there was always good food.

Freddie Dixon Sr.:

Well, I tenured there at Wesley, I was there for what about 20 some odd years, 22 plus years. Wesley was a very historic church. It was created in the 1860s by a white pastoring district superintendent, by the name of Welch. Who originally started Wesley Methodist Churches as a mainline denomination, et cetera. And quite has a bureaucracy, et cetera. And the district superintendent was in charge of a number of ministers for his area. There's the bishop and then there are the bishop's assistant, who called district superintendent for specific areas. Welch, this was right after the Reconstruction, happened to be one of the white ministers who was charged with starting African American churches in the state of Texas. And in particular, in this section of the state, which was the middle section, et cetera. And Wesley was built as you know, we were a part of First United Methodist Church downtown.

Freddie Dixon Sr.:

Then Wesley had the distinction of building its own building down around Neches, 9th Street downtown, where the old post office, across the street from where the old post office had been. Wesley then moved to its present location. And at that time, Wesley was the only church that had a pipe organ, was the only brick edifice. You would've never thought that African Americans could pay over 20, 30, \$40,000 for the facility. And the original facility at that time was around \$50,000. And if you imagine 50,000 then and you imagine where we are right now, the equivalency of what 50 was, is a million dollars, million plus dollars now.

Arlene Youngblood:

I look at the architecture of the churches. So I'll look at the structure of different churches when I go to different parts of town, not just East Austin, I'll look at, and I like looking at the cornerstone, looking at the names of those individuals who sweated and said, "Hey, we're going to form a church where we can worship". And I love hearing the stories of a community and community is very important. So we learned from mom and dad, that community is important and being involved is important. Giving back is important.

Freddie Dixon Sr.:

One of the things that I've always had is, my mantra is you want to leave things better than you found. You want to always improve the conditions around you and the conditions for persons for more opportunities.

Clifton Van Dyke Sr.:

Now we have members at our church who lived in Round Rock, Pflugerville, Hutto, Manor, Elgin, Cedar Creek. So they come a good distance to attend. And I suspect that all of these churches are about the same. The community church for most part doesn't exist anymore. And I think that the program of these churches are going to have to readjust because you don't have people who can run over to the church in 15 minutes anymore. And you think about, they're passing up many churches to come to your church. So you're going to have something to hold them there because if not, for the sake of convenience, people are going to say, "Well, I just can't drive 30 minutes on I-35. There's a church right down the

streets for me". And if you aren't careful, you don't have some programs in place to draw people these churches are going to die.

Interviewer:

That's it, right? That's what's left, the churches.

Clifton Van Dyke Sr.:

And that's why I mentioned to you earlier about if you demolish those, there's just another sign of where they used to be.

Interviewer:

And someone I spoke with, I interviewed a couple weeks ago was talking about how a lot of the churches on the East side now are being destination churches because a lot of people don't live in the community.

Arlene Youngblood:

Yeah, but it's a blessing. Folks have no problem with coming across town.

Interviewer:

From out of town, what have you to worship with us and that is a gift from God, because they do want to have that experience worshiping at a Black church.

Clifton Van Dyke Sr.:

Because there were other forces in our society that were saying that we were less than others. And of course we know that's not true. You go back and look at our history where we came from, some of the smartest people in the world came from there. So we had a great legacy to follow and you look at the short period of time that African Americans have been free in this country. You look the progress that we've made against tremendous odds and there have been some tough hills to climb. And it's a matter of having a good balance I think that the spiritual life for us was very important.

Clifton Van Dyke Sr.:

About going to church and having a clear understanding of where our gifts and our blessings come from. So that was sort of drilled into us. There might be difficult times in your life. You won't be excluded from them of course, but you must press on and persevere because we've always told our children, if it was easy, everybody would do it and you have to have a right mindset. And I don't believe spiritually, you can do that on your own. Because many of the challenges that you're confronted with, you have to have a very strong mental balance to be able to juggle all the things that are coming at you and life is not fair.

Freddie Dixon Sr.:

But just think about this for a moment. People right out of slavery enter Reconstruction, had the vision to build an edifice of such, that's now Westley United Methodist Church. But not having any education, only working in domestic situations got into that much debt.

Freddie Dixon Sr.:

Nowadays those of us who are so sophisticated, we get ready to do something, we want to know, "What is my liability? I don't want to be a part of that. I can't dream that. I don't see us paying." Can you? But here you had a people of faith who said, "Hey, we're going to do this and we're going to get in this debt. And we're going to pay for it. And this is going to be our church". And those people had the vision and had the faith and that church has been paid off and paid for, for years now. But it was the will and the determination and far most the faith of these persons, to really dare to go ahead and do that. Where is that risk taking? Where is that spirit of coming together?, et cetera.

Freddie Dixon Sr.:

And nowadays, it's with all of the knowledge and the education we have, there's still for me, a lacking of persons to have that kind of vision and that kind of spirit to want to launch out with that kind of debt. So, Wesley has been that kind of a church, where it's always been a people of faith, but a people who have always been involved in doing things in the community and making life better. So it was in that context when I came to Wesley that I felt encumbered that I needed to take it on to another level.

Patricia Calhoun:

But you do get tired of having that, whatever it is in your DNA that says that you're not good enough. The church was really a foundation I think for many of us. And that's how even going back generations, I think has contributed to African Americans being the resilient people that we are.