Oral History Second Interview with Ed King
By Don Fortenberry

This is the interview of Ed King by Don Fortenberry at Galloway on Friday, January 23, 2015.

DF: Ed, in your first interview you didn’t say a whole lot about your early life in Vicksburg and how that shaped the way you saw race issues. Tell us something of that part of your life, and what there was at Crawford Street, the church that you grew up in, that shaped the way you saw the issues of race.

EK: I was part of Crawford Street, which is one of the oldest Methodist churches in the state. My mother’s family had been part of that; my grandfather was one of the trustees—-that sort of thing. My family had been Methodist, would have been also involved in the Methodist church at Oak Ridge, out in Warren County where my family had a plantation. I went through normal Sunday School classes.

The time that I was there was critical, though. In the post-World War II period ‘46-‘47, I would have been in junior high school or in high school, and we were reading national church literature that became an issue in Mississippi with the rise of the Citizens Councils and things like that a few years later. Many churches abandoned national church literature, but it was very significant in my life. Once the race controversy began, it made the national church literature a little more intriguing. The national church literature was talking about a world, and the Methodist church, through ecumenical organizations, really was a part of a world-wide Christian movement. Not that the other churches were not, but only the Methodists and Episcopalians thought in terms of being part of the national church that was related to the world church. The others, the Southern Presbyterians and the Southern Baptists were still just a southern church. Crawford Street has a stone marker referring to it as “Crawford Street ME Church South. I didn’t know what that was, but only in 1939 did we have a merger of the northern Methodist churches and the southern white Methodist churches and the black churches that were in the south, but white churches were segregated from black churches that were placed in the new Central Jurisdiction.

I benefitted from that. The period was looking at the rise of a nuclear world, which was frightening. There would be things in the church literature like how did Europe go crazy with a Second World War, when we just had one twenty five years earlier. Race was one of the issues, gently brought up in Methodist Sunday School occasionally. There probably were Sunday School illustrations that someone had deliberately tried to put black and white, red and yellow children in pictures, but subtle things like that so that the critics of the national Methodist church literature were right. It was dangerous and subversive.

People were more open by the time that I was in the Methodist Youth Fellowship. There I subscribed to Motive, a church magazine, and there would be topics and articles about national issues so that in my Sunday School and Youth Group in Vicksburg, we would just assumed that other Methodist churches around the state—-and I think it was true at times, ‘52, ‘53, ‘54—-before the big decision in ‘54 we knew that segregation in the public schools was coming as an issue, and I still, by that point, believed that some changes were needed, but that
the northern people putting out the magazine didn’t understand that “separate but equal” would work. Took me a long time to realize that things weren’t very equal. But it was still something that we could talk about.

I had a Sunday School teacher who encouraged discussion. That may have been still in the 6th, 7th, 8th grade, before high school, some of us, as we began to hear about the Holocaust were saying, “How COULD the Germans do that? How could the Germans lose their faith?” It would have been the same lesson that someone in New Hampshire was reading. The teacher was saying that we were using the phrase, “the Germans” almost like the Germans had used it against their enemies, “the Jews.” It got us thinking a little. Then the teacher asked was there anything that we do that shows we have no prejudice against Jews? Certainly, in Vicksburg there wasn’t. It may well be that Jews couldn’t join the Country club, I don’t know. But they certainly would have known the same people. There was a Jewish temple in Vicksburg before the Civil War. There was a separate Jewish cemetery, but nobody thought of that as discrimination. It was just part of the Jewish tradition. But what about others? But the Germans tried to destroy people, and this teacher threw one at us, “How many Indians do you have at your school?” “What do you mean?” “I mean American Indians? Didn’t you study that Mississippi was once mostly American Indian. What happened to the Indians in Mississippi?”

By the next week, we tried to talk that one through. We tried to say that they all voluntarily moved to Oklahoma because it was better hunting grounds and so on. But this had started with national church literature. After a week, this teacher said, “Well, we talked about Jews and Indians, what about the way we treat the colored?” “Well, we could still think and talk, because the teacher could not have imagined that five years later there would be chaos and no such conversations.

It was the time that good teachers, good ministers, good school superintendents could still openly do things. At regional church meetings, out from Crawford Street, through Youth Fellowship again, we had county-wide meetings or meetings in the district that covered several counties, and then we would have conference-wide meetings---I remember a Methodist Youth Conference-wide meeting of high school students and some college students, but mostly high school students at Copiah-Lincoln Junior College---that’s in the middle of Mississippi right up the road from your area of McComb. We had black Methodist high school students visit us. They never stayed. They would come in early afternoon. We might have shared some cokes and some kind of a discussion. They did not stay for supper that night. They did not stay overnight.

They weren’t there late at night when we had folk dancing, so somebody out of the Methodist cabinet office---people at that high a level---knew what we were doing—they were doing it very discretely. Somebody in the adult Methodist world had relations with black adult Methodists.

DF: Do you remember what year you are talking about?

EK: I’m talking about the years before 1954. I’ve tried to think in terms of this meeting at Co-Lin, probably ’52, ’51, maybe as late as ’53. We would meet at different places, sometimes at Millsaps, that was the most frequent place to host. But I was about to give you the name of the Co-Lin President, who was a prominent Methodist layman.

EK: Ewing, yes. We wouldn’t have done this without telling the administration, but there was this level of black and white Methodists in contact with each other. Knowing that not just school integration, but church integration would one day be an issue. Very quietly done. No big thing about it. Although it got talked about. You ask about parents down here. My parents would hear from other parents in Crawford Street church. Or from kids from Gibson Memorial or from one of the other Methodist churches—“Did hear what went on at that Methodist meeting?” We would be asked about it. So it’s late ‘52, ‘53 when things are an issue, and somebody is talking against what the conference and the national church people are trying to do. It couldn’t have been just Mississippi. This must have been happening in other southern states. White Methodists that I met in the Civil Rights movement knew that this sort of thing was going on and had had the same experiences that I had. In Virginia, in Alabama, West Florida Conference with Bob Zellmen, people like this.

My family wanted to know by ‘54 who specifically was pushing this. I would say the same thing that the other kids would, “Well this was just part of it.” We sort of got the idea that it might not be good to say the Reverend So and So or Youth Director So and So. It was just part of the program.

DF: That’s an amazing story. I would assume that you reacted to what you were hearing in a deep kind of way obviously. I am assuming not every person in your youth group would have reacted quite the way that you did.

EK: There certainly were differences, but there was also the time when nobody thought there could be big changes. It was like one day change will come; long, long, off. So it was tolerated, but people in the national church leadership that were certainly aware that things were moving much faster in America. They probably had a debate: should this be in the Sunday School literature and decided, you know, we don’t have twenty years. But we didn’t have arguments about it. We just had differences, and if somebody didn’t want to go meet two black students from Brookhaven St. Paul Methodist church or something, you went to a different study group. So that those who came to these things were kind of choosing to hear or meet. We never had something like a black minister as speaker.

Some I imagine on the planning committees of the conference youth offices where you, Don, are familiar with the style, somebody might have said, “We are going to have four ministers, why don’t we have a visiting black minister?” Others would have said, “We’ll catch hell if we do. That will be too shocking. It will be too much for people.”

I’m talking about moderation being used brilliantly. Gradualism and evolution. If I had had to defend my views, it would have been 90 percent southern traditional.

DF: Let’s move to some parts of your life that I don’t think were covered in the first interview. Tell us something of your relationship to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
EK: The first time I heard of Dr. King was in December of 1955—soon after August of ’55 when Emmett Till was murdered. The trial went through September. I was a student at Millsaps, a sophomore. Everybody was talking about it. We would ask kids from the Delta, when they went home on weekends, “What’s going on?” Nobody thought that this was right. Everybody was shocked that this would happen, and we had good teachers again that would ask some of the right questions. Particularly in sociology and history classes we could say, “Are there any current things….I think it was Jim Ferguson…I think it was a Southern History class that I was taking that fall. Good teachers gently brought good things in.

I understood that it was proper that the men were not convicted. What they had done was wrong, but there was no witness so they couldn’t be convicted on the basis of the things that they said. Remarks and things like that. Times have certainly changed on that. People could be convicted without witnesses 50 years later, but I understood the complexity of the legal system, but the assumption was that they would be retried on kidnapping charges. They got off the murder charge by saying they had kidnapped and whipped the boy and turned him loose. Well, they should have been arrested for that. I think that was the assumption in most of educated white Mississippi. But they weren’t. It had become a political issue. In the period after the ’54 Supreme Court decision, the good moderates were silent and did not organize into groups and the ultra conservatives with the politicians quickly organized into right wing groups. Like Citizen Council. They were the only voice tolerated in the white community. Though the pressure from the white racists was that the two men accused in the murder were not even going to be tried for that. So by Thanksgiving time of that fall it looked like all hell was going breaking loose all over Mississippi.

You were beginning to hear of ministers who had lost their jobs, school teachers, college teachers who were leaving, and there was no hope. Things were just going to go downhill. Then in December, I did mention, I hope in the Vicksburg talk – it was in my notes, I must have mentioned it—a newspaper here in Jackson, probably on the first or second Tuesday in December that year, probably the Daily News in the evening, had a front page headline in the right hand lead column there about the Montgomery bus boycott. An article about the “Parks woman.” They would not have said “Mrs. Parks.” You couldn’t use curtesy titles. I thought this courageous black woman had said that it is time for a change, and material on the radio and tv had begun to mention Martin Luther King.

When I read about him, it was clear he was going to combine Jesus and Gandhi. I thought that this is really wonderful. On the opposite side of the newspaper, the lead column on the inside had the headline: “Last survivor of siege of Vicksburg dies.” Literally, Mrs. Parks, in Montgomery, and a white woman who had been a child during the siege in Vicksburg died, and the Vicksburg war and the slavery connection, is something I grew up with. I thought that this nonviolence is the way out. I’ll just be a follower of Dr. King. I’ll be a minister of a white church somewhere and my history will be slowly helping people to face things like those teachers had helped me. Dr. King would be there, and I felt like I was making my own little affirmation and pledge, but thank God he’s here, and the leadership is going to come from the black community, and we’ll have to find ways to get white people to respond. But we’re going to make it through, and there’s not going to be a big violent crisis in race relationship. Dr. King will see us through it.
The people who could have responded to Dr. King were already the ones who were driven out of the state. Silenced. I took a while to see that. But I felt I had a personal relationship with Dr. King as early he appears on the national scene. I had professors, Bob Bergmark at Millsaps, George Maddox had even been to Boston University School of Theology and did his sociology work at Yale. I knew through the Methodist Youth Fellowships where we had people like Bob Bergmark at these state-wide meetings talk about Christianity and race relations and so on. I was interested in the kind of seminary that had produced Bob Bergmark. He was encouraging me so, I went to Boston University. When people in Boston in September of ‘58 (I graduated from Millsaps in June ’58) I quickly met people who had been some of Martin’s teacher or guides, like Walter Muelder, the dean in social ethics, and Harold DeWolf in theology. DeWolf had been the one working closest with Martin. They arranged for the three of us who were white and one who was black during the Christmas break—we were all from the south and went home for Christmas—to meet Martin the night before we drove up to Montgomery. We had swung through Georgia and met Clarence Jordan in Koinonia. All of these things helped me to grow gradually. I’m such a moderate. Koinonia was run by these white Southern Baptists with black Baptists working with them in this radical integrated ecumenical white–black movements. Clarence Jordan not only was white, but his brother had been mayor of Vicksburg, so here I am meeting a Southern Baptist friend of Dr. King. The next day we are supposed to meet Martin King. One black friend was saying that the church had better back Martin Luther King, and that things were going to be a lot tougher than we thought. It wasn’t just going to be his good message, but it was going to take real effort to support and to stick with him. Gently laughing at me that I said I’d always—if he had an interracial meeting I’d encourage a few ladies from my church to go, and Clarence Jordan would say, “It won’t be that simple.”

That night Jordan was able to illustrate, unintentionally. Two of us slept on a couch in the living room of Jordan’s home, and it was cold as hell, heavy drapes over the windows. It was an old house, probably the windows came down to the floor, and I’d been cold in winters without central heat, but this was awful. The next morning Jordan apologized that it was so cold, and he said, “We’ve got the heaviest drapes we could, but the night before you guys got here, they shot out the windows!” Again, moderate...he could have brought that up the night before when he was saying this is a lot tougher than you think.

So, I am out of Millsaps in June and by December I’m having dinner with Coretta King and Martin Luther King at their Sunday dinner in their home, attending his church there in Montgomery.

I remember his sermon was St. Paul’s Letter to American Christians, which got pretty modern and looked at all kinds of issues in America beyond race.

So much for me was step by step. Nobody was insisting that we want all you southern Methodists at seminary to meet Dr. King. It was like, if we get this arranged, would you be interested? There is a time when you have to respond. One public school teacher in Vicksburg in Central high school, probably May 18, the Brown decision was May 17, school is almost over and the teacher in a civics or history class said, “We’re going to get through this. The south will make it work. There are enough good people, black and white, and it’s going to come very rapidly. It’ll probably be first grade, a year at a time, but it might be faster than that. But whatever, you folks that are seniors, you are the last of this generation of southerners from the
all-white school, and literally said that some of you are going to Ole Miss, and some are going to Tulane, some to Millsaps—-you had better listen to your younger brothers and sisters because next year or the year after they’re going to have black students in their classrooms and that’s what the world is going to be. You will not have experienced that.

That teacher would have lost her job two years later, probably have been lynched, if she had resisted in any way. She would have been called a Communist. I don’t know what her church background was. The same time that teacher did that, we had the Latin teacher who also taught some senior English that year when somebody was sick. The Latin teacher was in her mid- seventies. Not as old as I am now. But ancient to the high school students who she had stayed on to teach a few students in this school’s Latin class. She announced that the south had stood up to Yankees before, we would again, and that she was never going to teach a colored student in her class and if they brought one, she would resign. Well, she could have resigned fifteen years earlier, and we could sort of not see what she was doing that was so frightening because it was so silly. We had this other teacher taking another moderate approach, but if we missed those moderate steps, we still were called to respond.

So, by ’58, I’ve met Martin and then working with Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist group that Bob Bergmark was a member of and helped get me in, we are doing that kind of thing. Martin is assuming that I’ll go back to a church in Mississippi, Richard Deats would go back to a church in Texas, Kempton Haynes would go to a church in Georgia. (Our black friend from seminary, Miss Viryia Bartee’s father was a Methodist minister in Canton, MS) He was saying that is a great way to work, and we’ll all stay in touch and if we have a lot of white southern clergy helping us start to have interracial meetings, saying the law should be obeyed when it happens. It all seemed to make logical sense.

DF: Did you have contact with Martin, Dr. King, immediately after that experience in Boston?

EK: There was a lapse, but he would come up to Boston to speak almost once a year. A little bit of contact. But he was particularly impressed that Medgar Evers was one of my guides. As a Millsaps student in our interracial meetings with Tougaloo, I had met Medgar Evers, and Medgar encouraged sociology students to come to his office, and his suggestion was that we do some papers on poverty and race. He had census data and all kinds of cold, uncontroversial things to look at.

DF: That was somewhere in the year 1954-1958?

EK: Yes, I met Medgar in the fall of ’55 and had already been attending interracial meetings, but I knew Millsaps and Tougaloo had those – one more thing I had assumed I’d be a part of. Medgar carefully did not try to overwhelm me or Sylvia Elliott or any of the other students who would always be a little more than we had thought about. Like the poverty---the US census had data and George Maddox, and the sociology people were encouraging us to do research on things like that. Here was the data from the 1950 census. Most of the black homes within two blocks of the state capital, within two blocks of Galloway church now---most of those homes did not have indoor bathrooms or running water and about twenty five percent did not have electricity. But cold numbers, what does this mean? Medgar never said, “Let me show you,”
until we asked, “Where are these places?” Again, we slowly realized separate but equal doesn’t... Medgar’s wife, Myrlie, is from Vicksburg and Medgar took a particular interest in me because I was a Vicksburger. But then we became very close during my junior and senior year. We’d meet him at least once a month.

DF: Tell us some of the experiences you had with Dr. King as a part of the movement.

EK: When the direct action phase started, the sit-ins, I was working with the Fellowship of Reconciliation which with the American Friends Service Committee was organizing and the planning for the sit-ins which went back to at least the fall of 1957. Probably the Nashville people were talking about who can do the next wave because the Montgomery Boycott did not spread. A few cities tried it for a few days-- Tallahassee, Baton Rouge—but it was only a forty-eight hour thing, and I know that people were trying to say, well, what next.

In 1957, again with this subversive Methodist so called Communist connections, the Methodist Student Movement held a national shindig every four years, and had been having it for a while. We would meet at some university campus during Christmas holidays. We probably had 2,000 Methodist youth there from all over the nation. We literally sent a bus in December of 1957, right after Christmas, to the New Year’s meeting at the University of Kansas. We sent a bus from south Mississippi, must have been the Conference office that organized things again, and we accepted black students from Rust on our Methodist bus. Certainly, against the law. We could laugh a little. If anybody didn’t like it, they were going to a national meeting, which had all kinds of things going on: race relations and the church would have been one small topic of a range of topics.

I went to the sessions---I think Bob Bergmark actually came along to that, but I went to the sessions on the Montgomery Boycott. On what had gone on there and the connections with pacifists. Jim Lawson was leading the workshops. He had been an officer of the National Methodist Youth Fellowship and was Dr. King’s chief advisor on strategies for non-violence. We were told about plans for some kind of big student movement that became the sit-ins. They were going to visit every southern state, and they were sending out literature in advance.

The literature was a comic book produced by the Pacificists of the Fellowship of Reconciliation about the Montgomery movement. It was very wordy as well as pictures, described how non-violence worked. Then the comic book showed Dr. King teaching people in Montgomery about Gandhi and several pages on that. Then instructions on how to do this in your own town. Study, picture, target, pray and so on. I helped distribute those here at Millsaps. People of MSM helped distribute them at Ole Miss and other places. Even here, some of them disappeared. Even at Millsaps. Conservative students had seen them, heard them about them and just tore them up. My room was searched by some students and other students said they were sent by the Citizens Council. They were also trying to get students to spy on teachers at Millsaps and so on. But Dr. Bergmark must have been at the meeting because he was one of the key persons who was working with Lawson, but he had been in the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

We decided that Millsaps and Tougaloo would jointly host Jim Lawson to talk about how to get college students to be the front edge of the movement. By late spring there was so much turmoil on the Millsaps campus about Anse Sperensky as a speaker at a seminar during
religious emphasis week, month, or something like that, on religion and segregation. I didn’t even go because I had passed that. That seminar blew up with Sprensky as the speaker. The legislature damned him as a Communist, the Citizen’s Council demanded that Millsaps apologize. What they never even noticed was that the next week Millsaps had Jim Lawson, a black radical Methodist, who had just come home from India to work in Montgomery. They never even knew. But we canceled the rest of the programs and nobody ever found out that Lawson was black.

We were the only state that did not have this preparation for the 1960’s sit-ins. Every other southern state did, and Oklahoma and Missouri and Kentucky. A year in advance of working, and then Nashville, training led by Lawson, became the place that the sit-ins were supposed to start. They started in North Carolina because some guys there heard about what the Nashville students were talking about and launched their own a week before Nashville and used some of the same pamphlets and study material. That is fine. We were on the edge of that. Dr. King had given his blessings that this was a good thing for students to do and that he would support it.

When the things broke out, I was sent by the F.O.R. to national workshops the year before, planning on the students uprising. My role was to be the good minister if I was there behind the scenes to help people, so I was sent to Montgomery to work behind the scenes. Several hundred black students from sit-ins had been expelled, and people had been badly beaten. Things came close to a race massacre in Montgomery. They were six to eight weeks behind the big sit-ins in North Carolina and the national media attention had died down a little. But it was the most violent place.

Mississippi was peaceful. We had no demonstrations in the sit-ins in 1960. I was sent to Montgomery, and started to provide meetings between black and white clergy to talk about what the students were doing. Not to support it, but to just talk about police brutality. I was amazed that they did not have an interracial functioning clergy group there. But I operated out of the Methodist bishop’s office, out of the office of the Conference Director of youth education, whatever the title was. Again, the national church connections, being the place radical groups outside could meet—well, it’s Methodist and, you know, the bishop had to approve just a little. I had to get meetings set up with students from the Methodist colleges, like Millsaps, to meet black students who had been arrested and had been beaten and put in jail. This sort of thing. I was stunned that I couldn’t get the clergy moving, but it had been mapped out for me that I should not go to the college students until at least some of the clergy know what you are doing and think it is a good idea. So again I was trying to move as the apostle of caution and moderation (which I firmly believe in when it works). The clergy wouldn’t even move ...and they know I have the blessings and I’m operating out of the bishop’s headquarters.

Church women held a meeting and that got the men, the clergy, a little more interested, but black and white church women held a meeting, and we sent one black coed to talk to them about what had happened. The next day the police raided the SCLC office. Martin had just gone to Atlanta, but was coming back and forth. Ralph Abernathy was basically in charge, and we had a group of Methodist students from Illinois, from McMurray College, touring the south to study the civil rights uprising. Literally, the preceding night, before they went to Montgomery, they had been in the dorms at Millsaps and meeting with Tougaloo students.
They came to Alabama and wanted to meet SCLC people---there were about ten of them---and SCLC was having them for lunch and I went along because I knew that they had just come from Millsaps and didn’t know how I could work them in with the Huntington students.

The police raided SCLC and we were in a black restaurant, sort of next door. These Illinois students weren’t supposed to get arrested. Neither was I. We were all arrested as the police were cursing Abernathy and other blacks that they knew. The newspapers called it a sit-in. Well, everybody in FOR knew that I was not going to participate in a sit-in because I had to stay clean to go home to Mississippi. I would say that God used it and there I was, and it wasn’t a sin-in. The Illinois professor, Nesmith, later came to Boston University to teach theology, and he had assured his college administration that they were not going to take part in any sit-ins. They would just going to study, and I could see how all these careful plans were going to blow up. That made it a little more difficult once I was in the newspapers, and this was on the Today’s Show news the next morning.

Another sit-in, this time in Montgomery, showed our pictures in the news here, and horrified my family. It was no point in keeping totally quiet behind the scenes after that.

I was asked a few weeks later by SCLC to take part in a real sit-in, but what was needed for all the sit-ins was legal action that could get to the Supreme Court. For what they needed, I was the only one on the scene who could fit. Any time I came down, I even stayed in a white hotel because I was trying to stay behind the scenes. We cooked up this deal, got the Conference Director of Youth Relations again deeply involved.

DF: Are you talking about in Mississippi?

EK: No, in Montgomery. I checked into the hotel again, the Jefferson Davis Hotel, still wearing my clerical collar, and asked the hotel manager if I could have a Methodist minister have breakfast with me and put it on my bill on my credit card. All this was worked out by Civil Rights lawyers. The hotel manager said, “Of course you can.” And we did, and the Conference Director came and had breakfast with me. So again, Christians everywhere, not just in the black community, were ready to do something, and they knew what the plot was. At lunch I had a black Methodist minister, the Rev Elroy Embry, who had been in the sit-ins as a senior at the college, and had, like Millsaps students, had churches when they were students. The hotel manager said, “Of course, you can have another Methodist minister.”

We were quickly convicted of disturbing public peace, trespassing on private property. This got the issues that the lawyers wanted because nobody in the sit-ins, several thousand arrested by then, nobody was accused of violating the segregation laws in restaurants. It was always disorderly conduct, a breach of the peace, but nobody could be more peaceful than two or three ministers. We were convicted anyway and sentenced to a chain gang.

They had dropped the chains. I didn’t know it. Blacks were sort of laughing. They knew that Alabama had dropped it. The next day, we were out working, and I spent a week on a convict gang in black and white stripes with guards riding sometimes in a jeep, sometimes on horses, with shotguns. The Montgomery paper ran a photograph that was on the front page of the Jackson Daily News: “Mississippi Methodist Minister on Convict Gang.”

The bishop suggested that he knew personally bishops in places like Idaho, Colorado, and Maine and if I wanted to transfer, he could help me. So he had some warning before his
day blew up. I said no, but the deal was that I would go back to seminary and start a graduate program. I hadn’t even planned to get a master’s degree beyond the basic seminary degree, and that if I would just delay things with the Conference, I could be ordained elder, enabled to lead the Holy Communion Service, but not voted on for conference membership. The bishop explained that the most difficult thing was that I was called a Mississippi Methodist minister, and that technically they couldn’t say that if I were not a member of the Conference.

But I got back to seminary, Dean Muelder, who was very active in the World Council of Churches and in ecumenical stuff, was just thrilled. He said that this may come but it may be decades or centuries, but you are recognized as a Christian minister without a denomination. Anybody who recognizes Methodist ordination, will have to recognize that you are a minister without the hang up of a denomination.

Marvin Franklin, obviously not on the front row of the ecumenical struggles of the world, put off my membership in the Conference. When that happened, that was ’61. That was why, when Galloway honored me 50 years later, I could associate the date very accurately.

My parents went through hell. Even the first year that I had been arrested in the sit-ins. Very similar things happened to the family in McComb in Freedom Summer, who were run out of town—the Hefners. People stopped speaking to my mother in church, in the PTA, in the grocery store. Occasionally, usually, people would speak and say, “How did you let your son become a Communist?”

But most people would not even speak. They were afraid to be associated with her, and she couldn’t take it. Her family had been in Vicksburg since Spanish times. My father’s family was West Virginia and Louisiana, so none of them were there to catch it. The Jackson Methodist District Superintendent tried to comfort my parents, and told them that he was telling people that she was not a Communist and my father was not a Communist, that Ed got brought into the Communist party at Millsaps College through Communist teachers like Bob Bergmark and George Maddox. That this was an example of what Millsaps College could do to young people, but that I shouldn’t be judged since I was so immature, but it was time to get rid of all Communists in all Methodist seminaries—that Boston University had more Communists than any other seminary in the United States. They got this lesson and this was meant as pastoral comfort. He really did mean well by it. He was doing his best as a minister, in a crisis, to comfort people.

My father worked for the Corps of Engineers under the US Army, which runs the Engineers in flood control work, and he was able to get a job in the West Memphis, Ark office of the Mississippi River Commission. So they were able to move to Memphis, but my mother couldn’t face it, and could never ever return. She came back to Vicksburg for funerals, but her idea of what her life in old age should be couldn’t be, but the military had helped them move.

Once things were that visible, I just decided I’d just have to abandon even coming back. I spent a summer in Montana as a pastor in a parish out there while that minister was in school somewhere. I went back to seminary planning to join the Montana Conference of the Methodist Church. Ole Miss blew up in the Meredith riots and I felt like I thought I’d be in Mississippi when that happened. I wasn’t. I would have still been trying to do this nice clean work behind the scenes to find out how who could help, which is the kind of organizing that I had skills at. It was obvious I couldn’t come back to Mississippi. I came down here looking and asking during Thanksgiving. Every teacher at Millsaps said, “Thank God, you are already gone.
It is hopeless. You can never return. Several like Maddox said, “It is impossible and we’ve got to leave. Nothing good can come here for another fifty years.” These were my advisors.

I looked at one other alternative to get back into Mississippi. That was switching to the Episcopal Church. I talked to the Rev. Duncan Gray at Oxford. This was six weeks after troops were all over the place. I talked to Duncan, and he thought it would not be impossible, especially if I would stay a year or so longer in graduate school, and slowly work on it. I talked to the Rev. Bo Holleman.

Now for the record, the Methodist church in Mississippi had two black Conferences in the Central Jurisdiction and two white Conferences, the North Mississippi Conference and Mississippi Conference that I had been raised in. There was a sort of the line from Yazoo, Philadelphia, Meridian, and to the coast. Bo Holleman was the District Superintendent in Tupelo. I talked to him, and he said, “Yes, we can do something in Mississippi. It is not going to be easy, but I think I can find a place for you in northeast Mississippi. I will work to guide you, if that is what you are trying to do. Let me know in advance.” But ever encouraging me, and he knew of too many people who had left and said, “If people are leaving, it is hopeless.”

But here in Jackson, Medgar Evers said, “What do you mean, you can’t come back? We’ll find a way. You HAVE to come back.” He said that he and Myrlie had a degree from Alcorn College, and he would mention how much he liked visiting Millsaps with the interracial student meetings, post-World War II when he was an Alcorn student—he said that we’ve got to find a way and my other advisor – I had two other advisors, Claude Ramsay at AF of L CIO, he also said, “I don’t know how you’ll get back, but don’t talk about going to Montana. “ The Sociology professor, Dr. Ernest Borinsky, said, “You can’t go to Montana. They’ve been too many white ministers leaving already. I know what you should do.” The chaplain at Tougaloo had left, but it had nothing to do with Civil Rights, but he got a better job in California. He said that Tougaloo needs a chaplain right now. Could you come in January? They are looking right now. I said, I won’t have finished my master’s. He said that doesn’t matter. I asked Medgar about it and he said, “Yes, you can be chaplain at Tougaloo.” But I went to Memphis and asked Jim Lawson if a white Mississippi can be chaplain of a black college. Lawson thought it was a wonderful idea. But once again, I got fantastic advice, good and bad.

Then I did the proper thing, checking with my bishop, Marvin Franklin, and the Rev. Willard Leggett, my district superintendent, and they thought my being chaplain at Tougaloo was wonderful. They would not have to find a white church to assign me to. I was officially appointed for work outside the church in another denomination in a college appointment, and with the United Church of Christ. Leggett never told this to the Conference that summer, I was voted out. I even kept back from activist things a little. My wife, Jeannette, a native Jacksonian and active in the Methodist church, was arrested here in Jackson before I was. Medgar wanted me to join, and I said, “No, I’ve got this church stuff and I’m going to be voted on at the Methodist conference.”

Well, we came back at the end of January when twenty-eight ministers, most of whom I knew, signed a pro-integration statement, “Born of Conviction” that was very moderate, but they were damned as Communists. I realized if I had been in Mississippi and in a church, I would have signed that statement, and I’d have been run out just like my friends were run out of the state. It was almost back to the Calvinists that God’s got a finger in this. But I do believe that God doesn’t have a finger but can use situations to stir up things. After a few days
Jeannette had been arrested while the Woolworth demonstration went on. Jeannette was arrested with Margrit Garner, a white woman at Tougaloo, a very active Christian member of Galloway church and Sunday School at that point. They joined some black church women and others, trying to hand out leaflets, saying Jackson needs to talk about race and carrying a sign, “Let’s talk!” They couldn’t even talk, they were arrested and things blew up so quickly that by the end of the week five hundred black students were in prison.

This is while Birmingham is going on. To try to delay the demonstration march of the black students, we had a demonstration at the post office which is the federal building, and I had more experience than anybody else. Medgar didn’t want to be there because he wanted the black clergy to do this. I was left to sort of structure things and guide them. To get it started and to introduce the black minister so I wore my clerical garb, even wore my purple stole since things were so crazy, and I didn’t think anybody would be arrested, but it was possible. I got the black minister to start speaking and a crowd had gathered and this was the only way we thought that any word to white Mississippian that Jackson was about to go the way that Birmingham had, unless we had visible black and white people talking together.

The mayor said that it will never happen, because there are no race problems in Mississippi. There is nothing to discuss. I was helping, but I did not think that I would be arrested, although I knew it was possible. The police charged and arrested us. There are some stories that will go in my books, if I ever finish them. Bishop Gray, Duncan’s father, was also aware that we were even willing to talk, but he was trying to get people— as were Dr. Selah, and Dr. Roy Clark—to set up secret meetings of black and white meetings of black and white business men during that week and the week before. I would tell people that even if you come to a secret meeting, nobody knows that it won’t blow up. I knew that I had been arrested at one. But we had been doing things and we had white people saying, “Yes, the demonstration where a black minister speaks and isn’t arrested at the courthouse, he’ll be able to speak to some white people. But what we are asking for is to talk, to begin. But we were arrested.

I was up for voting on my membership in the Conference. I was already ordained. For two years it had just been postponed. Roy Clark got it postponed so that my business was separated from everybody else in the routine pastor’s meetings, and each day he got it postponed as things got worse, and then finally it was left to my Conference membership was to be voted on a Friday morning. So Thursday night Medgar Evers, himself, gets me out of prison so that the Methodist conference can vote on whether I am a good Methodist. They’ve already been dealing with the twenty eight who signed the pro-integration statement. A few of them were still left there, and they were left for them to vote for me as their last vote. Even in that hysteria, the Woolworth’s famous demonstration had been followed by weak, small demonstrations each day. I lost conference membership by a margin of four votes. It was just incredible. It was like 79-75. meaning like almost half of the Methodist ministers in this conference, could not say I was not operating as a valid Christian minister. It was that close, even with all this chaos. Some ministers supported me.

Now the ones who voted for me had also been impressed by the twenty eight and what they had done, and the witness that other people were making. I know I am back in the conference now, but after the black and white conferences merged, so many people told me for years, that I voted for you that it was just an error in counting. I don’t mean that. They would have been very careful with the counting, but so many people later said that they had
voted for me, that there was a conscience there. I don’t think that they were lying. I think that they wanted to remember that they had or had not known. The morning after I was thrown out of the conference here, I got a call from Jim Lawson. He said to me that I would be getting another call. The next call was the black bishop, and he said that Methodist ministers are not supposed to be without the supervision of a bishop. Would you come into the Central Jurisdiction and let me be your bishop? (laugh)

DF: Who was that bishop? Charles Golden?

EK: Yes, Charles Golden. Once again, the structures of church, Sunday School, Conferences, bishops, procedures, all of these dead things are vital parts of the Christian ministry. And they can be made to function properly. Instead of my just being driven out, Roy Clark things got things spaced out over several years. I was rejected by the white Methodists, but accepted by the black Methodists. Some years later the white and black Methodists merged into one integrated Conference and that included me.
DF: Ed, one of the things that I would like for you to talk about is the kind of meetings that were held. You have mentioned interracial meetings, and I’d like for you to talk a little bit more about that, and maybe specifically, the role that persons from Galloway may have played in those meetings.

EK: In the spring of 1963 there were famous demonstrations by Martin Luther King and SNCL students and others in Birmingham, Alabama. That was national news. Black people here in Jackson probably and people in cities all across the south were looking. Could we do this here? Should we do this here? For six months students at Tougaloo and Jackson high schools had been working with Medgar Evers in a boycott of white merchants on Capital Street and other places. The goal of the boycott was to have white people and black people say that there ARE racial problems, and that we will talk about this, and we will begin to work on changes in race relations.

Medgar was very clear that it didn’t matter whether you talked about jobs, schools, or department stores where black women were insulted and couldn’t try on hats—something as silly as that—and lunch counters. But the time had come, the black community wanted to know that some distant day blacks and whites would change what was happening. As Birmingham blew up, the pressure developed here in Jackson that we want to do something now. We don’t want to have hundreds of people in prison and dogs and all of that. How do we move beyond that? Medgar had been very inspired by the statement of the twenty eight young ministers of the Methodist Conference.

By Easter of 1963 Dr. King is ready to begin the Birmingham campaign. He has been there. They have been working for it. But they are ready to move it up massively, and we were supposed to be part of that. Before this, eventually, three thousand people were arrested in about three week’s time in Birmingham, Dr. King’s last effort before mass marches was church visits on Easter Sunday to white only churches, the idea being that these Christians are the most likely of the white community to say things are not right with race relations. People don’t have to agree on what things that are wrong that can be changed, but just the whole package is not right. Now, can we find some tiny steps to move on.

I was sent by Medgar Evers to talk to Dr. Selah here at Galloway. Galloway was to be the first integrated church, and Dr. Selah was confident that people could be admitted, but it was an awkward time. He would have to do lots and lots of meetings and explaining church doctrine, church structure, while he, as pastor, was in charge of the worship service. He said to me, “Ed, does Medgar Evers know what I’m doing, trying to save jobs of ministers who signed the statement?” I think he mentioned Keith Tonkel, John Ed Thomas, a few others who did survive. Jim Waits (SP) may have already have stayed at his church, but knew he was going to leave. Selah and Roy Clark were telling me the same kind of thing about their efforts to save a few men in the ministry in Mississippi. Selah said, “If there is any way, this should not take place at Galloway at Easter in 1963. Even if it could be coordinated with Birmingham.”
Remember that Dr. King thought that might be the final step that they wouldn’t have to have the three weeks of demonstrations. Medgar agreed. Dr. Selah said, “I will have Galloway church open by the middle of June. Let’s put off this interracial visit until the middle of June.” I was going back and forth between Evers and Selah, and what he meant was that things are bad now, but Conference is going to be gruesome. The Methodist Annual Conference for Mississippi was scheduled to meet at Galloway the last week of May and elect delegates to the national General Conference meeting for the next year. Dr. Selah said, “It is just too much right now. If it is to try to get people to talking together quietly, starting with ‘can we pray together’ is wonderful. But can you find the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, or somebody else?” Well, no. And not with the background we had. Who we would have used. Perhaps Clarice Harvey and other black Methodists who he knew.

And Medgar agreed. We’ll put everything off until the middle of the summer, until the middle of June. In the middle of June Medgar was under a court order injunction not to have demonstrations or kneel-ins or anything like this. It had been upheld by federal courts, so he decided that he would have church visits. He would take black people to white churches, and that he, himself, would be the first person arrested, as a federal prisoner.

I was the go-between, as I had been on other things that we were doing. I will get back to the others with lay people in a moment. When Galloway had the crisis, Medgar brought people to First Baptist church, confident that they wouldn’t be admitted, but hoping that he was wrong in his attitude that they were too conservative. They were turned away, black men, dressed for Sunday church, and some of the black women began crying. Medgar had not expected this. They were saying, “If we cannot even pray together, there’s no hope anywhere.”

Medgar said on the spur of the moment—it was mid-June—“I decided we haven’t let Dr. Selah know in advance because Ed was out of town.” (I had been sent to New York with President Beitle from Tougaloo and Andy Young from Birmingham to talk at the biggest United Church of Christ local congregation, Broadway Tabernacle Church on Broadway in New York near Times Square) Otherwise, I would have let Medgar know that it was going to happen anyway. But we still, he might have been able to tell people that things might start happening and have told a few people. But it happened for the best of reasons that Medgar was sure we had cooperated, we had held off two months and that church integration would work.

Dr. Selah, as we know, was given a note that the people had been turned away, and he and the Associate Pastor decided that they could not continue to serve in that kind of church. In the preceding six weeks working very closely with Medgar, we had set up interracial meetings of women. Clarice Harvey Collins, black leader at nearby Central Methodist Church was working on that. I don’t even know who was involved—bound to have been some women here, and we set up interracial meetings of black business men and professionals. Very few black lawyers, doctors, but there were a few. Teachers would have been regarded as professionals. Roy Clark at Capital Street would have been regarded as a professional.

Roy Clark at Capital Street and Dr. Selah at Galloway found white men who were willing to go to early morning meetings, not quite breakfast, but I’m sure the black church who hosted it served breakfast. But we didn’t even call it that. To talk with blacks you’ve had this boycott. We’ve had this boycott, what does this mean? Look what’s happening in Birmingham. What does this mean for us in Mississippi? Bob Ezelle is the only one I know by name. I left it with
Selah and Clark to find the people. I would tell Medgar. He would find some black men and Medgar himself did not want to know who all was involved. But we had black and white men, Christians, meeting and women—We didn’t try to do anything with students because it was late in the semester after Easter and Millsaps and Tougaloo students have enough connections. But the clergy using their institutions, using the preaching they had been doing in the national church teachings for thirty years, knew that there were white laymen and laywomen here who had never talked with blacks in the church who were their professional equals.

We were having those meetings. The Associate Pastor here, Jerry Furr, was very involved. And Joe Way and Furr had both signed the statement of the 28. Joe was the Associate Pastor at Capital Street. They probably got people involved that Dr. Selah and Roy Clark didn’t even know about. They probably had very powerful church men that they thought he’ll be the first. Like Bob Ezelle was thought of as the first and he was. But there probably were some people like that. I know that Selah and Clark did not want to know people who said no. The last thing we wanted was news.

I was finally able to get interracial meetings started here during this period that ends with Medgar’s death. But during this period we had interracial church meetings of clergy. I’ve tried to remember if the Rabbi was involved. I don’t remember an issue about it, it was happening so fast. Surely Selah and others setting it up would not have objected. They may have felt on strategic grounds, if we hope to get a single white Baptist here, we should not have the Rabbi. I don’t know. I would do things deliberately out of the way. With meetings with clergy I knew we had the Episcopal bishop and Marvin Franklin, the Methodist bishop, even though he’s facing Annual Conference and the Catholic bishop involved. Dr. Leggett would have had to have known if our bishop knew. We had maybe two meetings like that. We were meeting at Farish Street Baptist church and probably twenty people, clergy, black and white—more black than white—but we had eight to ten white clergy. I don’t remember whether St. Luke’s was there. It doesn’t matter. They might have been. It wasn’t just Galloway. It was Capital Street and Galloway as the lead. Then whoever they could reach. I’m very sure the bishop came to at least one meeting. If he didn’t, he would have sent somebody to represent him. Catholic bishops were there, the Episcopal bishop, the Methodist bishop was certainly approving.

None of them were holding press conferences. This is eight months after Ole Miss (and James Meredith’s entry). So it is quiet, but it is happening. At one of these meetings at Farish Street church, somebody comes in and says the press has found out that you are here. We were in a back Sunday School kitchen room, about this size. I thought this was wonderful. I hadn’t planned it. I hadn’t leaked it. The men for two meetings were debating whether they should stay silent. Trying to reassure each other, but John Allin, who by that point was the Assistant Bishop of the Episcopal church, was pushing that there was enough trouble in Birmingham and that we shouldn’t let Jackson blow up with the same kind of trouble. Others were saying that this is why we need to talk. That is why we have to have this token kind of interracial meeting.

There were television reporters at the front of the church and newsmen. The black pastor of the Farish Street church, I’ve forgotten his name, but he was there. I’ll think of it in a minute. It is not crucial. He came in and told us what was happening, and that the press knew that something was going on. They didn’t know who was there. But something would have to be said. So we said John Allin will be our spokesman. Maybe that was one more reason he was
trying to not do anything. I imagine Bergmark was there. He came to most of these meetings. But Bishop Brunini, Bishop Gerou came and the decision is that the black pastor of the church will be the only spokesperson. I’m just listening, but what kind of strategy are they going to come up with at this one. I assumed he would tell the press that there was an interracial meeting of clergy. He would not give any names or denominations, but say it represented many white churches in Jackson and many black churches, hoping the mayor would start cooperating with a group of black clergy who were saying that we want an interracial committee. Saying something like that without saying we had actually voted or agreed, but that we were discussing the value of this thing that was being talked about with the mayor. So that was the agreement. The black pastor spoke to the press, kept them out of the sanctuary. They were in front of the sanctuary. We were on the back end of the church. White bishops literally sneaked out the back door into an alley. Their cars were secretly driven away from an interracial meeting.

So there are white people in the community that are ready. I started to yell at them, “Bob Ezelle and these men have got more guts than you do.” But you don’t do that unless all else has failed. I was just so crushed and then awed, “By God, this would make a great movie. Those tv’s could get back here. Which bishop escaped? I saw a bishop go down that alley! No, he didn’t. There were two bishops. You saw one. I saw one. (laugh) We had to laugh at ourselves.

I had come back here thinking what I could do. I could work behind the scenes. Even after all that had happened. But after the twenty eight had made their statement, after Duncan Gray had made a statement with his life during the riots at Ole Miss, and then the twenty eight here, and by this time Birmingham beginning to blow up. But I had helped to get them together. What little bit we have left, because we have had fifty years of Mississippi Religious Leadership Conference grew out of this very awkward and difficult attempts, but the roots are there. I know the name of one person of these laymen, but I’ve always knows there were more. I’ve always known and I wanted to know who, but I could appreciate Dr. Selah saying it is better if I don’t even know said “no” and who said “yes.” So the Associate Pastor worked with Bob Ezelle.

The first meetings would have been like at a Sunday School room, at a little black church. But they had other meetings, and I did not even want to know where ---maybe at some person’s home or it could have been at some black business man who let them meet at his home. I just don’t know. But there was this opening, and it was because of the institutional church, guiding individual Christians in their witness and their struggle.

When Medgar was killed, two white women from St. Andrews, who had been involved in some of these meetings were stunned and said, “What are we going to do?” “Well, we can’t do anything about these interracial meetings. But we are members of this church. When somebody dies, you take a casserole and a dessert.” So they fixed southern food and dressed up and took it to Myrlie Evers’ home. Their husbands, I was told, did not know.

The people are there. The clergy need to remember this. And the people need to remember that they are not as alone---when they think God is asking them to do something weird, there may be somebody else. I don’t know if anybody from Galloway took food. Black people took tons of food, but that is what you did at a funeral and that act pf those two white women was as radical as saying we shared communion at the rail together. We did the right
thing, and we said that we can have a society where blacks and whites, Christians, Americans, whatever, we can do the right thing, and it is a good thing.

DF: Were there moments at Galloway church that were very important to many of us, such as, the Sunday that you were honored by Galloway church. Would you say something about that?

EK: In 2011, we had had a program in Chicago at the Chicago Temple, First United Methodist Church, where there was a crucifix with a partial body hanging on the crucifix. The cross on the crucifix was a cross that had been burned attacking me and students and people at Tougaloo College. We had given that to one of the Chicago white ministers who had come down here and been arrested during the season of church visits, and people were arrested at Galloway and many other churches, including Lutheran and other denominations. Fifty years after those events, the Chicago Temple was going to place this on permanent use. I went up there for a service. There was talk of how we can let people in the Mississippi Conference, now just one conference, both black and white separate, and it was the fiftieth anniversary of my ordination as an elder. In the Episcopal or Catholic church that would be ordained as a deacon and then as an elder or as a priest. This is the Methodist term for priest who could do fully the sacraments. Of course, you were under church law. You could celebrate Holy Communion, which was very meaningful to me. When I was ordained, the Conference was meeting here at Galloway. We had been at Galloway, and I was kneeling there at Galloway when I was ordained as deacon. Then two years later, I was kneeling at the Communion Rail with twenty other men who were being ordained elder, into the priesthood. These were all men that I had been to school with at Millsaps, or a few, if they weren’t from Millsaps, I had known through Methodist Youth movements. Your fiftieth anniversary into the ordination of the ministry in many churches is celebrated so that was kind of a reason, but I knew people at Galloway church wanted to say that we have come so far and use me and there must have been a lot of hostility to me when I brought interracial groups to visit Galloway over the years of 1963-64. It was something that I had never expected. I was deeply moved by Galloway doing this for me. Some people knew people in the congregation need to know the painful, beautiful history that had gone on before that.

DF: One of the things that would be worth saying is that moment in Galloway had been preceded by your being named the Alumnus of the Year at Millsaps and the Alumnus of the Year at Boston University School of Theology, and also being designated an icon of the Civil Rights Movement by the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, and so that moment at Galloway was also a celebration of the recognition by these groups.

EK: It was a recognition of my contribution and their role then at Millsaps training me, the seminary training me. The Memphis Civil Right Museum Jim Lawson was honored the same year I was, which was a very meaningful ---Here I saw it as a celebration of what we might become. We are moving towards being one church. We are one in doctrine, in discipline and in structure. But in America we are still very separate as black and white people. But we are moving, we are on the way, and this was the way of saying that some people wanted to respect
me, even though they might still disagree fifty years later with some of these tactics that were needed. They were saying that you were acting as a Christian minister when you did this. It was certainly hard on Galloway. A different history, but that is in the history that people are recording here of people who wrestled with their conscience and decided eventually that Galloway should be open. It is a Christian church. Other people left Galloway, and many of the people in Galloway that would have supported “integration” were afraid of the people who would leave and not just how much money would leave, but what does it mean to that family who’s been here for three generations, if they feel that they are no longer welcome at Galloway. Terribly complex issues. I felt that this service honoring me with this crucifix visible from Chicago was dealing with many, many things. But personally, I was deeply touched. I almost cried many times, but I also felt pride that somehow this weird life I’ve had is what I was called to do as a Christian and as a minister.

DF: Thank you so much for the time recalling things that are so important to the Movement and Galloway’s role in it. Thank you very, very much.