William Burwell, Track 4

Tape 2, side b begins.

JB: There we are.

WB: So I spent that time. And I thought, by now, there was a general recognition among the—the faculty that—that there was a need to educate people about the minority experience. My basic premise was that the purpose of general education is to ensure that no matter what a student majors in, there is a core of knowledge, there are certain things that we want every college graduate to know. To mean, to say that we are educating students, to turn them loose into a world that is becoming large—into a country that is becoming largely minority, and in a state that is becoming largely minority, and the state we've educated them is to—is just to tell a lie. We've not done the job, you know? So, I thought that that was a general perception of the ac, faculty and administrators that I dealt with, department chairpersons. What I found was in spite of their acknowledgement of that as a fact, FTE was a—was a bigger reality. How does this impact my FTE? You know, kind of thing, and when that became the issue, forget the principle, you know, so that then, well, so
00:00 the history department, so, we're gonna have—okay, alright, we'll agree with you, Burwell, everybody needs to have an ethnic experience, but we won't call it that, we will call it an intercultural experience. And so, we fight for weeks, debate the meaning of intercultural, you know? And then, we finally think we've settled on something that I don't think—it's a—you know, it's no longer ethnic anymore, now it's intercultural. Now the women's studies can qualify under this, and Jewish studies can qualify under this. And that process just disillusioned me with the whole notion of academe being serious about preparing students for life.

JB: How would you have defined it? In other words, if you had been defining that section of general education, what would it have included?

WB: An ethnic experience.

JB: Limited to?

WB: Well, limited to those who are generally excluded from the society in terms of ethnicity. Blacks, Chicanos, and Asians. Simple as that. You know, to bring in Jewish Studies, to bring in Women's Studies, to me it was ludicrous. So, and that was like two years of dealing with that, and people like Elizabeth Berry and folk whom I remember when they first came to the campus and all the systems I used to go over to her class and she's teaching intercultural communication and these cool kinds of things, and then when those people, when they have opportunities to become deans and this and that stuff, man, all that commitment to the humanitarian principles—and actually wanted —so I was talking strictly from an academic point of view. If we are serious about education, how can you say that you have edu—you have prepared a student to live in California and you have not

required him to know something about Chicanos, and Blacks, and Asians? And you tell me you've prepared him to go out there? It's important for him—he's gotta have some art, he's gotta have—the things that you're requiring him to take on a GE, are from my point of view less valuable to him and useful to him than it's gonna be to him to get some sensitivity to minorities, because he's gonna have to deal with them. To me, then it became clear to me that the—that educating students was not as important as the finances. As the money. As the status. As the—which department was going to be able to hire somebody. That became the determinant. Not whether what was gonna be ultimately the best for the students. That—I became disillusioned with it, so much so that I was gonna leave the whole field before I ever left to go into the

5:00 ministry. And by then, Jim Cleary and I had become friends. And I really mean that. As much as I could say that could happen between a student or a faculty member and a college president. Because he knew about these threats on my life. And many times, I met Jim Cleary at night, at his house, secretly.

JB: Right.

WB: Yeah. I remember with his dogs, his German Shepherd, he got me interested in German Shepherd dogs, so we had a relationship, you know kind of thing. And he said, you know, well listen, you know, he talked me into, he said there's a new program coming out called administrative fellows. You know? And I can get you in it, and, you know, this will be, it will get you in a position, administrative position, where you can make some of these kinds of changes that you want to make. So, that was my—so I went through that program and stayed. And then, in the middle of that program, I got converted to Christianity.

JB: It was something that you were converted to. At this point.

WB: Yeah, at that point. During that—this time of my disillusionment with academe and a lack of, what is the, what is Maslow's highest level—

JB: —Of hierarchy?

WB: —there of self-fulfillment, I guess it is—

JB: Self-realization?

WB: Self-realization, you know. I was—I did not have that feeling of being fulfilled in education anymore. I felt good about what was there, but it was like I couldn't take it any further, I couldn't—you know, and I found that it was, with Reagan, and his moving up, that was a taking back now, attempt to take back what had already been won, through affirmative action and other kinds of programs. So, I was searching, again, as to how I can make an impact. And the ministry became it. And it just changed everything for me, it gave me a fresh outlook as to how I could make an impact on the lives, on the qualitative lives of the Black community and on Black people.

JB: We were talking about this before we went on tape, and you pointed out on tape that you come out of the community as a community organizer. As I see it, you really never left that role, but essentially your focus became academic for a while and now you've returned by of way the church to that original role. Is that a fair statement?

WB: Absolutely. And much of what I learned through experience and academic training at Northridge is what I'm all about here. There's no doubt in my mind that the experience of organizing the department is what led me to organize this church. You know?

JB: Could you just summarize what you told me about the church, again before we went on tape, as to its nature and its size and its direction?

WB: Yeah, essentially the church is—the church is—the Black church is the largest, most enduring institution in the Black community. Even when I was at Northridge, when we were being pursued by the police, the church is where we had to go to. The church is the only institution in the Black community that has, from its birth to now, that has retained its autonomy, its independence. It is the church in the Black community, if you want to find a building, the largest buildings we own in the Black community are the churches. If you want to find—if you want to do anything in the Black community, politically or otherwise, you gotta go through the church. There would be no—it's not a coincidence that the major Black leaders were ministers. Was Jesse Jackson, or Martin Luther King, or whoever, it's no coincidence that they were ministers. Because the church—and that's what I came to realize that this was a more viable way, really, of reaching the Black community. Then, of course, I found out that most of the Black people are in the Black Baptist church because the Baptist

10:00 church is autonomous. The Baptist church has no hierarchy. A guy can simply say that, listen, I have been divinely summoned, and who can say he is or he hasn't been? Because you can't call up god to find out that god divinely summoned this guy, you gotta to take his word for it, you know, you have to either accept him or reject him. But you can't stop him from going out and nailing up, or, a sign over his door, and putting a reverence on—reverend in front of his name. That's why you have so many storefront churches. In fact, I did something with one of the guys at Northridge, storefront churches. But that's why you have so many. You know, because these guys, they don't have to have anybody to validate them, certify them. So they can do that. Black folk go there because they can have a sense of importance, a sense of, "I am somebody," as I was saying to you earlier. The guy who works as a sanitation worker all week long who is looked down upon, he's the trash man all week, and nobody thinks much of him, but on Sunday morning, in the little Baptist church, he is the Deacon. On Sunday morning, he puts on his suit and tie, and he has a title on Sunday morning. He's Deacon Brown on Sunday morning. And he has authority on Sunday morning. And he has a sense of, I am somebody. So, the Black church provides his self-esteem for him, kind of thing. He's able to see something that he owns. This is our church, this building is ours. What he could never do by himself, economically, with three hundred other Black people, he's able to do. He can buy a bus, and he can do things, he can take the

church in the Black community is the vehicle, the social vehicle for moving out people. I remember as a kid, Birm—growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, I'd tell this to some of our church folk, I remember that there were no—that was no automobile in my family. And the only way that I got to travel out to some of the big recreation areas, was once a year the church had a church picnic. And the church—and so every kid in the neighborhood, which you had to go to the vacation bible school, you had to attend that two-week thing in order to be eligible to go to this picnic, so we all went to church, we all got baptized in the [unintelligible] water, that kind of thing. What I remember, then, that the church exposed me to some things that, you know, so, that's what the church is all about. That's why—so, I'm in the church now, and I said before, because of the autonomy of the Black church, a lot of the Black ministers are called by god, but do not see their call as to go and become academically and theologically trained. And since many of these guys have the gift of gab and charisma, they're able to lead people and to draw masses of folk. But because they are not trained, they cannot teach the scriptures. They cannot teach the bible. They don't know how, they don't know what it really contains. So you have a population of people who are ignorant as to the true teachings of scripture. Then you got a population of young blacks, I say the '60s, people who went to high school in the '60s, you know, and here we are thirty years later, now, a large—see, the literacy rate of Black people in general has risen. You've got a large population of people who turned the church off, as I did. Because the church was viewed as a white man's religion. And the church was viewed as an anesthesia to the Black movement. So, we turned it off, and turned away from it. And because the guys who were leading it were largely illiterate, ignorant, and sometimes nothing more than pimps where they, you know, kind of thing, we wouldn't—we turned away from the church. But because of the spiritual heritage it was as a people, we always had this yearning for our spiritual roots. So now, what's happening is, we got a large population of Blacks, literate, who were not—who will not fellowship at a place where the minister has no education. So––so ironically, the same

15:00 people—I carved a way, and I'm just thinking of this as you and I sit here talking, Northridge is a way where Blacks can go and be educated. And those same individuals, once they're educated, now I have an opportunity to minister to them, because now they come to—

JB: First Berean.

WB: Come to First Berean.

JB: And you created the church.

WB: And I created it, yeah.

JB: Just as you created the department.

WB: Yeah.

JB: Bill, I know you, I know you need to leave shortly, I wonder if there is any question—you always run this risk as an interviewer, that you didn't ask the big question you should have asked, you know, it's kind of a—of a worm that turns in me, did I ask every question that I should have—

WB: Well, you know, I think there's one thing that I would, perhaps, like to have on record, and that would be this: usually I would want someone to ask me, how, what is the difference, now, how do you compare now, your view, your worldview now as opposed to then? You know, the Black-White situation. Okay, so that's the one question that—

JB: Would you answer it?

WB: It is this. I used to see the world as Black and White. There was the Black folk over there, and the White folks over there. They got it, and the haves and the have-nots, kind of thing. Us against them, kind of thing. I no longer see the world like that, now. I see the world, now, as right and wrong. As evil and good. And some of that evil is perpetrated by Blacks, and some of it is perpetrated by Whites. I am now not so interested in the Black—the Black people as I am in right, justice. Before my philosophy was any means necessary. Now, the only means that I will use and employ now are godly, biblical means. I used to see violence as something that I would do at the drop of a hat if—if—I used to say, the ends would justify the means. I no longer believe the ends justify the means. The means must be consistent with what's right, what's good, what's pure, rather than what works, kind of thing. I am—I feel a kinship, I used to feel a kinship with all Black folk. I now feel a kinship with all Christians. And so, I am not as fatalistic as I used to be, I used to feel that I would never live to be the age that I am now because the revolution was—my life was going to be spent in the revolution. I don't have that kind of fatalism, now. I look forward to my grandkids, and that kind of thing, now. I used to feel that all of my hope was in the political arena, and if things didn't happen there, I saw no hope. I became despairing when I would see certain things happening. I no longer feel that despair now, I have a lot more hope now, because of my Christianity. So, that's the question.

JB: I think I failed to ask the most important question, I'm glad you did. Thank you.

WB: I don't know, we're just about fine. We just got out between eleven and—

Tape ends 19:09

[END OF INTERVIEW]