

Interview with Mrs. Mary Whitfield

April 22, 2010

Interviewer: Sterling Hill, Larry Howard, Ashley Remington, and Sharpe Sablon

Larry: Mrs. Whitfield, how long have you been attending Macedonia?

Mrs. Whitfield: I joined Macedonia in September of 1974.

Larry: What was Macedonia's stance on the civil rights movement, and did you agree with it? And how so?

Mrs. Whitfield: Well, by the time I became a member of Macedonia the major thrust of the civil rights movement was over--the marchin' during the sixties. But once I joined in the mid seventies, of course, the struggle was still on and Macedonia has always been a strong advocate for civil rights. In fact ,our pastor Eddie Smith has always been an outspoken person on demanding the rights that have been guaranteed to us first by the Const- well no not by the Constitution, first by God as individuals who have rights and privileges just by their living. But also rights that have been given to us by the Constitution. He was active in city government, and so we were exposed to a lot of the ins and outs of rules and procedures that either advanced our cause or deterred our cause.

Larry: So Macedonia was active in city government?

Mrs. Whitfield: Well, Pastor Smith.

Larry: Oh, Pastor Smith.

Mrs. Whitfield: He was a member of city council for a number of years. Also ran for another position several times but did not win those elections. But because he has always been a part of- he had been part of city government and just an active mind he's the kind of person who is always bringing new information to the church always getting us involved in community efforts. And so we were constantly exposed, and we were constantly admonished to exercise our rights and to be informed about what was going on in the community. So we were almost like a light to the community. The other thing about our church is because Pastor Smith has such a reputation and a name in the community, people seek him out for his opinion and because they seek him out for his opinion and often his endorsement when they are running for office we have always been privy to a lot of information about civil rights and government: local government as well as state and national government.

Larry: Tell me about the atmosphere of the church.

Mrs. Whitfield: Well, when I first became a member of Macedonia it was evolving. It had moved from south Macon to Anthony Rd., and the church was growing. Ministry was becoming the focus rather than programs. The church grew rapidly during the eighties. We had probably a membership of about two thousand. Over the years the membership has decreased, but the emphasis on ministry has always maintained that same level. What I mean by that is ministry entails reaching people doing that which will bring people up economically, spiritually, emotionally, socially. Over the years we have brought more people on staff to help to carry out the mission of the church because in the early days it was virtually Pastor Smith and a few other individuals who were basically responsible for the managerial part of the church, but that has expanded too. I can't even count the number of people we have added since that time. And therefore our growth now is not in numbers; it's in quality because we have people who are specialists. We have people who are knowledgeable about the area they are suppose to operate in.

Larry: Do you think that the Civil Rights movement plays a big part in the church today?

Mrs. Whitfield: Our congregation is an older congregation, and most of us were born before the civil rights movement. We saw it unfolding. We experienced the separation, true separation. Most of us went to segregated schools, most of us um heard Martin Luther King, "I have a dream" speech, although I think that sometimes that is over played in that there are so many more things he said that were just as beneficial. Most of us um had a desire for our children to advance in a more integrated society. Not because we just thought it was better, but because we thought it was the right thing. Our resources, our money, our labor all of those things that were being pulled in this country to make it what it was, we contributed to it, and so we felt as strongly then as we do now that all of the rights and privileges that were available to us should be granted and should be granted with out us struggling.

Now what we have seen evolve over the years, we have gone through the struggle for equal rights and to a degree we do have equal rights but not fully. What we see now is economic struggle. The political struggle was the big issue during the fifties and sixties, now it's the economic struggle, and that's where Pastor Smith whacks strong in trying to get his members to understand that until we learn to manage our money and to spend our money in ways that will cause us to be financially secure and in places where we can get the best for our bucks. That we are still behind if we are not focusing on the economic struggle because even though people say racist segregation is the major type of discrimination. Truly, truly, it is not. It is socioeconomic. Racial discrimination is horrible. It is ramped everywhere, and it's not just between blacks and whites in the United States, it's all over the world with a lot of different categories. But the reason socioeconomic segregation or discrimination is the major one it covers everybody everywhere. If you do not have the economic resources to be able to influence decisions, and what I mean by that, if you are spending your money in ways that can cause a politician or it doesn't even have to be a politician just somebody in business to

miss your money if you don't spend it that way, you really don't have the type of impact that you need. And that is the reason it is so important that we recognize now that the political struggle is going on. We are very proud that Obama is president of the United States, but we understand that that's just the tip of the iceberg, and that there are so many other areas that we need to advance in. Part of the problem is racism, but part of the problem is a lack of knowledge among those people who should be fighting the struggle.

Larry: As a veteran member of Macedonia, do you see a problem in the church with giving the younger members or the newer members to understand the civil rights movement?

Mrs. Whitfield: Yes, it's very difficult for people to buy into something that they don't have a vested interest in. They um, if you think about it the people who graduated from high school in Bibb county Macon in 1987 were the people who went through our educational system in a desegregated manner, so their whole lives have been basically where they have been in mixed society. Sometimes they see the examples being demonstrated of profiling, job discrimination, but because they didn't actually have to fight for it. They didn't have to sacrifice; none of their generation died. I won't say none—that's too extreme, but few of their generation died to have these rights, so it is more difficult for them to see it.

But I think now with this big struggle that is going on now between Republicans and Democrats, I think they get a greater sense of how those lines are drawn. And how rigid society can be sometimes because people refuse to come together and work for a common cause. Because that's one of the beauties of the Civil Rights movement especially in the late sixties. People from all races all socioeconomical levels came together to push this because they thought it was either right morally spiritually or they thought it was right politically. So hopefully this generation will be able to sense what the demands are. And the sad part about that is, it doesn't matter what color you are or what class you're in. If we have people at the bottom who can rise up, if they are intentionally kept down, it brings down the whole society. It's just like in school. If they put too much emphasis on the higher level students, if the bottom is down, test scores are going to stay down. I don't care how high the top students score. If those at the bottom are not advanced, it's going to impact the whole school. The same thing in society, as long as we have people who are denied their rights who are not given opportunities, our country is going to lose education. Look at what has happened to the rate of graduation of the United States now in 2010 compared to in 1988 and 1990. We were leading the world with graduates in high school and college. Now we are way down, and, yes, I think that the younger people do not really understand. But they have to be taught first.

Larry: What things have you seen change?

Mrs. Whitfield: There have been a lot of changes. First of all, there are integrated neighborhoods, where when you think about in the fifties, that basically was not the case. I remember when I was first moved. When I bought my first house, I was one of the two or three blacks on that street. But in that section, my family was the only one. The house next door was owned by blacks, but they were living in New York. They bought it as a retirement house. And I remember my aunt would come to my house, and when she would leave, she would say close your curtains and lock your doors. I didn't really understand it for a long time because she had gone through times when people lived in integrated neighborhoods where their houses were burned and where they were not allowed to stay in them. So I've seen that change.

I've seen the desegregation of schools. I've seen more and more blacks in positions. And let me tell you what is ironic, in the last few years, let me go back. In the first few years of teaching it was very difficult to find a black professional to invite in my class to talk about whatever the topic was. By the time I retired, I had no trouble whatsoever. In fact, I had trouble thinking of whites because I knew so many blacks personally who had advanced to become insurance agents and doctors and people in high places even in government all over Macon. So I saw that change.

Some things have not been so good as far as the change, especially with black young men. The crime rate has just sky rocketed with that population. We see more teen pregnancy in Macon is over the charts, with teen pregnancy and HIV cases. A lot of that has to do with the lack of education—people not finishing school not pursuing their dreams or higher education. And higher education does not necessarily mean a college degree, cause there are a lot of people who can go to tech school six months and come out and make more money than I ever made in all the thirty one years of my career.

So there are some positives, but there are some negatives. I think the biggest positive that I see is hope that people now have examples in every situation, from politics to religion, social work, business of people of color who have made it in those areas. And at least they can say I do know somebody, I too can aspire to that.