

Interview with Muriel McDowell-Jackson

April 23, 2010

Interviewers: Jane Hammond, Julian Onyekwere, Melissa Mantecon, and Regan Hice

Jane: How long have you attended St. Peter Claver?

Muriel: Um, I have been a member for 36 years.

Jane: Okay, did you have family who went there or did you just start going there on your own?

Muriel: Well, actually, I went to the school. My mother went to the school. I have cousins who have been members on both sides of my mother and father's family since at least 1903.

Jane: So when was the church inaugurated or first started?

Muriel: The earliest baptismal record and we accept that as the founding date that we have is 1888.

Jane: Now, we have heard that it has been integrated since the beginning. Is there a history of that or just word of mouth?

Muriel: It's considered integrated because whites and blacks worship together. I have actually seen a letter while working on the church history where they talk about the white family from Wisconsin that comes to church every Sunday and that letter is about 1905-1906.

Jane: A lot of what we've read has been about congregations that served both whites and blacks separately, like separate services just because they were Catholics who needed a church to worship in. So that's not the case?

Muriel: No, everything I've read because from the beginning. Of course, the priests and nuns were white that were involved with it, and, like I said, I've got the written proof where they're sending a letter back to Mother Catherine talking about the congregation, how many members there are and the majority being black and then there are some white Catholics. And when we look at the baptismal registers, there are a number of whites being baptized into the church.

Jane: So we assume that since they were like this, as opposed to St. Joseph's, that they hopefully had an active role in the Civil Rights Movement.

Muriel: Well, I don't know how much so active it was. I was told the story about an older parishioner who is deceased now, and they were out teaching the kids how to play

tennis on the courts behind the church there. We used to own some of that property before we gave it to the city. The police drove by and quickly turned around and came back. They saw what presumed to be a white man and a black man and then children, and they were concerned they were trying to integrate. I can't remember which of the priests, I think it was Father Canon, said, "I'm the priest here at this school, and we're teaching the children to play tennis." You know, that was kind of their way of dealing with it, end of discussion.

It's always been that way. I have a parishioner, and she has told me people have asked her about her children and how they responded to the white teachers in the school and so forth, and she explained it's never been thought of black vs. white. It was the nuns and priests and the students, so it's kind of natural. You don't think of when there was a change. The majority of the lay teachers before the integration would have been black, and these were teachers that would have worked like 40 years and so forth.

Jane: So do you think that since the congregation was there, and they were accustomed to being black and having the white people together that they were supportive of the integration that was happening in Macon during the time?

Muriel: They were pro integration for what was going on in the community and seeing what was going on, but as far as being able to come out on everything, it still would have been... Even though we are a mission parish of the Diocese of Savannah, because we are not a D parish, we were being run by the Society of African Mission Fathers that ran the church, and then the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament ran the school with the priest being the ultimate advisor. But whenever there was something that came up, the sisters would take it to the priest. The priest would then take it their provincial council, which at this point had moved to New Jersey. Then they would contact the Dioceses, and they would examine what was going on and come up with a solution. So you've got a lot of fingers dipping in so that's where thing can get very interesting. I know individual members participated on their own, not necessarily as representatives of St. Peter Claver. I think that for a lot of people that's what it would be. You might have had groups of individuals from a church that got together to handle things.

Jane: Speaking of the pastor, was there a pastor during the whole Civil Rights movement time period during the 60's, or did it change frequently? Do you know anything about their views?

Muriel: Well, Father Galvin would have been here during that time. He came here about 1958. He came here from Africa. He came here for his health because he was not feeling well, and he stayed as the Priest. He was the last SMA to run the Parish before we became a member of the Diocese. He had very strong views on protecting his people. As a child, I heard him talking about "I don't want anyone messing with my people," and I couldn't comprehend that. I mean this is a blonde haired Irishman with a cheerful smile and everything, but he took his role very seriously. So he would have been the one that

would have taken questions, problems, or solutions out to um out towards anything that the church wanted to do. Because of the way the structure was, he was the ultimate authority. There was no Parish council or anything else. Anything that was done had to be done on his say so.

Julian: I have a question. You said that St. Peter Claver was a mission parish?

Muriel: Yes

Julian: Okay, I'm from Nigeria, and there's a lot of Catholic influence in West Africa. So was St. Peter Claver involved in any of that mission work in any way?

Muriel: We were started by the Jesuits who ran St. Stanislaus College and then the SMA who were actually in Nigeria as well in West Africa. The Society of African Missionary Fathers, they were known as the Lyon Fathers because they started in Lyon, France. This was interesting. They came to the U.S. to try to raise funds for their mission work in Africa. That's when they realized the conditions that were going on here, and so how can they come and ask? The assumptions were made that the Catholic Church here was on a good even footing. So they came and saw the conditions here and decided that they needed to start a mission here in the U.S., which is kind of backwards when you think about it. Most of the time, the U.S will go out and do missions. All of our early priests, and I think some is regional, the early priests were French. Then it's World War Two when we get the Irishmen coming in. So the majority of these priests would have served time in Africa before they came here.

Julian: I see. Did St. Peter Claver sponsor some kind of event, or I suppose bringing any of the Africans here?

Muriel: Some things like that didn't start happening until the 80's. We actually had a sister parish in Africa for a while, and the person who was in charge of it left, and I was in college in the 80's and grad school so I missed some of it. That person left and then the priest that was in that community left, and I think that was one of the areas where things were getting rough. Then we do things like the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament have a school in Haiti, and we send things down, school supplies that kind of thing and like that.

Julian: I suppose moving forward to the 80's, going back to the sponsorship, was St. Peter Claver in any way able to send these foreign citizens to school at Mercer?

Muriel: Well, not to Mercer. The ones we have sponsored have been like the seminarians. Like now we have a lot of Polish seminarians. What usually happens is we give a gift to Father, and he turns around and divides it among the seminarians that he works with. There's a lot of structure there that we have to go through and around. A

lot of times it's just like a Sunday collection that is taken up and then it's directed to what the diocese sees as the most pressing need for various events.

Julian: Going back to St. Peter Claver. Was there ever—I'm not sure what the equivalent is, but I suppose in Baptist churches it's a pastor—was there a pastor of minority status at any time that you can remember?

Muriel: Actually, we have our first right now, Father Dan who is from Nigeria. See the first thing is the majority of the priests are going to be white and foreign. The numbers of African American priests have always been low. The group that did form, and that's been very interesting, the group that did form African American was the Josephites, but because of Father Lishuner, who was in charge of the SMA, he wanted to be the bishop of all negroes in the U.S. and this is in the 20's. He had a falling out. The Josephites never got a foothold in Georgia because the SMA had the entire state locked up basically. So the Josephites, there are other communities like in Mobile and Louisiana and Mississippi and all that that have had all black priests early on. In the 60's and 70's when we were going from a mission to a Dioceses and that was one of the primary request. You know we had nothing against the SMA. They had been wonderful to us and we had wonderful working relationships, but it was thought well was it possible to bring an African American priest in. The numbers were not there to do it. Our first American priest, that's the interesting thing, our first American priest was Richard Kyle when he came in the 70's. Then we went back to Irish, we had one American, then we have had 3 Americans now, and now we're back to Polish and Father Dan, of course, who is Nigerian. I mean it was kind of funny when we thought about our first American Priest. He's actually a temporary administrator because Father Adam is on medical leave.

Julian: So do non Americans make up the majority of your priests?

Muriel: That's actually what is happening. The church is having to look out towards, you know, like I say we're originally French and then the next big wave came from the Irish, and a lot of the nuns that served with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament were also Irish. Now they're looking to Eastern European countries such as Poland and South American, and then they think the next place would be Asia to get priests because Americans are just not stepping up to the plate like they used to do. It's like the joke was, you know, every family gave at least one priest. I mean for instance there's a family at St. Joseph Benedetta's they had three sons and two daughters who became priests and nuns out of like ten.

Julian: I see. I suppose that makes the church rather progressive in a sense that you have a lot of priests that are of non-American lineage.

Muriel: Um, I've never thought of it that way. I think if they can find people who go through the program and go through seminary and decide they want to be a priest, they are thrilled to get the numbers. The thing is of course the church is based in Italy, so I

mean our Father Adam, he's back home in Poland right now, he speaks Polish, Latin, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and a little bit of English. So I mean we don't ever think about nationalities. It was only when I started doing this that I realized.

Julian: Well, I suppose that not in the sense of where the church comes from, but progressive in respect to other churches around here like Baptist churches. I'm Baptist, but I was born Catholic. But we ended up in a Baptist church. It would be a tall stretch to have anybody come in and preach that wasn't from the South. I mean outside of the state the numbers dropped dramatically and also outside of the South as a region. You know it's hard to come by.

Muriel: Our first priest that was from Georgia was Father Brett. He was raised in Statesboro, and we all got a kick out of that because we started talking about some of the groups, and we start talking about, you know, the relationship we had with some of the priests that were native to this country was different from the ones who were foreign. The ones that were not born and raised here, their families being overseas they wouldn't get to go visit them, they seemed to form a closer bond to their parishioners. They didn't have, you see Father Brett could drive to Statesboro to see his mom. See my husband is Baptist so I mean their church.

Julian: Their church is more conservative?

Muriel: Well, they've actually become un-conservative. They have allowed two women to become ministers. But on any given Sunday, they can have 5 or 6 ministers in the pulpit. Most of those are people who were raised in the church who went out with maybe other churches and then they come back and they leave that church. So they have a wealth of numbers, and now at one point we had you know we could have two or three priests in the rectory over there as backups, and now we have one priest and if someone, for instance, when Father Adam would go out of town to help with the Hispanic mission, they would have to go and find someone else to come in. So the numbers are becoming the biggest problem. When you hear someone is from Africa or California or something, where they're coming from really doesn't matter because you know they have received the same type of training. But you see the personalities where some maybe a little more open and others are a little more conservative until they learn what is going on. So individual personalities play more of a part sense it is structured training.

Julian: Did that diversity in any way influence attendance throughout the church history? I would assume with such a wealth of priests, you would have a lot of attendance, plus people just trying to see what's going on at St. Peter Claver.

Muriel: Well, I think I could say because St. Joseph's has a lot of families with Irish backgrounds. One of my good friends that used to work here, her father in law was born in Ireland. So during the years where we had a lot of the Irish priests like Father Galvin

and Father Cavanaugh and so forth, a lot of people from St. Joseph's loved to come up there because they could talk to them and listen to them and talk about going over to visit and so forth. Um because I know in the 50's you would have mixed masses. I've talked to different people who have gone. For instance, Holtz Veal lives here. When he wanted to go to mass for services, his mom would tell him to go to St. Peter Claver because it is closer, and it was safer to get to there on his bicycle than it was to go to St. Joseph's. Um, and one of the things that has always been stated Father Timmons who was here in the early 70's when a lot of the parishes were consolidated and schools were consolidated so some schools and parishes, both black and white were lost. They were trying to look at the financial weight, which was decreasing the numbers of priests and nuns, and the thing that was going for us was the school was full. Also they got a Saturday night mass. And that allowed a lot of people who normally wouldn't have come there. Well, I can go to St. Peter Claver on Saturday and meet my obligation and be free on Sunday. A lot of them thought practical. It's almost like before the 70's and after the 70's is when you deal with it more for us with the integration and so forth, with the integration of Mount de Sales and St. Peter Claver and St. Joseph's and so forth in that I think people are making conscience decisions whether they are attending an African American church versus, "a white Catholic church." And also I think another thing is also economics. Socioeconomics play a part.

Julian: Did the diversity of the priests and the mixing of the masses cause any trouble for St. Peter Claver in Macon?

Muriel: I've never heard of any.

Julian: Especially during the Civil Rights Movement in the 60's, is there any kind of tension there?

Muriel: I have never heard of any, and I've asked different people. I have talked to people who helped integrate Mount de Sales and so forth, and it was more of a matter of just being nervous on individual levels that they were gonna go to this or they were gonna go do that. I think because of the structure having been there for so long the changes were not as, I don't want to say drastic, but they were coming. Um, I think there was not well you didn't have that unknown factor sense it had been a mixed parish for so long. Um, there was less of a non trust there. That working relationship had been accepted. I mean blacks could go to St. Joseph's. I've heard different things about where they would sit and so forth, but a lot of them were uncomfortable. Not because it was St. Joseph's, but because it was a much larger church. It's not as intimate as St. Peter Claver is. Um, and they didn't know the priest.

Julian: On a more contemporary note, does St. Peter Claver involve itself in any kind of public works or civil service, like the big thing now is, I forget what they call it, something Corridor.

Muriel: College Hill Corridor?

Julian: Yes, College Hill Corridor and the whole restoration of Macon. Are they involved in any way with that kind of stuff?

Muriel: Okay, we are involved in and I'm going to lose the name of it. It's the new thing that's going on around the country. Mayor Reichert was involved in it, and we have participants on the board with the Pleasant Hill. It's St Peter Claver, Vineville, Methodist, Allan Chapel, I think the Church of God down on Walnut is involved. It begins with an S, and I've just lost the name of it, but it's where the churches come together to help improve their neighborhood and so forth. We were the ones that started the MLK Annual Breakfast years ago. Our priest was the one along with members of our church that founded Tubman Museum. We had prison outreach when I was a kid. The nuns would go in and the nuns walked the neighborhood, checked on individuals, you know people knew who you were if you went to the Catholic school or the Catholic church, you would go to their home on Friday, and they would have fish for you. So everyone in the neighborhood knew each other and respected each other, worked together and you know it's just become a more organized outreach. We have a food pantry, which St. Joseph's contributes to and so people all in the Pleasant Hill neighborhood come in, and get the foods they need. We keep like Kroger cards if they want like meat and bread things, you know, to give them their dignity. We just give them a Kroger card and let them get what they need and so forth. As we watched the diversity in the neighborhood, it's been more Hispanic families as well as whites. So I think we've talked about this, a lot of things we do we don't think about them as being special because we've always kind of had a foot in that door and now it's just becoming more formalized and more organized in the community.

Julian: Was there any kind of outstanding violence that occurred in that neighborhood or do you think the fact that there was a church in that neighborhood kind of settled everyone?

Muriel: Hmm.

Julian: I suppose that what I'm trying to say is, do you think the neighborhood surrounding St. Peter Claver is safer as a result of St. Peter Claver being there?

Muriel: I think it was because, like I said, the priests and nuns would know who your grandparents were. But now a lot of people in the neighborhood... Let me put it this way, I always tell people I say you know Katherine Drexel's dream of education came true. A lot of people went through that school. Catholics and non-Catholics went through St. Peter Claver. They went to high school, and they went to college and even higher education and that was her dream, to provide education. And then they can't come back and work in their own town because of their degrees and so forth because the jobs aren't here. So unfortunately we're at the point now where these people who I

have grown up with who have children are living in Chicago and Tennessee. So you don't have that coming back in, the families coming back into the church and so then their parents and grandparents even move out to a bigger home or just pass away then you have new people coming in who don't have that relationship with the nuns walking around and so forth. So we're kind of losing that cozy neighborhood feel. Does that kind of answer what you're asking?

Julian: Yes.

Melissa: Going back to the location part. Macon is very divided. If it was in North Macon, do you think it would have such a good impact with integration of the minorities?

MURIEL: Absolutely, because most Catholic churches are neighborhood based. For example, in New Orleans you're going to have the neighborhood for the French and the Polish, for the Chinese. Even as a friend of mine from New Orleans said the Black New Orleans, the White New Orleans, the Cajun New Orleans. Catholic churches were traditionally put in neighborhoods, and they would have neighborhood priests that are Polish. So it was just normal to put a black parish in a black area. Actually that's one reason why it was moved from Pio Nono Ave. to Ward St. was Father Lishuner wanted to put it in a black neighborhood to make it easier, because at this point Vineville was building up so the parishioners were having to walk from Pleasant Hill all the way to the parish through Vineville. There were people who were upset. Back then, people crossed pastures and land and wouldn't think about it. Some parishioners were being harassed and so forth and you had the mill town there as well, Manchester, and so he felt it would be better for the church to be in the area where the members were from.

Jane: When was the school founded in relation to the church?

Muriel: School opened in 1904.

Jane: So it's right up there with the church.

Muriel: Father Kenny read about Katherine Drexel, this young woman from Philadelphia who was giving up her fortune to educate first natives then African Americans. He wrote to her and her about what he wanted to do, and then he got permission from his superiors out of New Orleans. Then they had to write to the bishop for more permission, and they sent him and Father Powers the basic money to purchase the building and get started. From then on and then in 1913, they purchased the land and built the school, the convent, and then rectory, and then the church was completed in 1928. They started on it in WWI but supply materials were short.

Jane: So when he proposed the idea, did he say I want to have this school where everyone could go?

Muriel: No, it was actually open for the colored children in Macon. Well you see what was happening was the people in Macon, black and white, who were living on that end of town who didn't want to walk all the way to St. Joseph's were coming there. It was actually disrupting because that was a seminary, so it was disrupting the studies of the priest and the young seminarians to constantly have to door bell or gate ringing. So they needed to build a parish that was away from the seminary, and they started thinking more and more about it, and they realized a majority of the people coming there were colored Catholics. And also at this point there is a movement to try and mission to colored Catholics more and in the South. Those numbers are always so small and always an effort to retain or bring them back and so forth. They talked about their eagerness to learn and so forth, so when she came out with this money and it was geared specifically. They were originally talking about starting a trade school and but that evolved more into a regular school.

Julian: How would you describe the numbers of Catholics in respect to their denomination as far as races go. You said there was a small number of colored Catholics, which is understandable. But do you know the basic break up of roughly how many people were which? I mean just like...

Muriel: In U.S or Georgia?

Julian: Oh, I mean in St. Peter Claver.

Muriel: Oh, St. Peter Claver, in the actual parish when I was growing up would have been like 98%.

Julian: 98% colored?

Muriel: Yes, 98% black. You would have the priests and the nuns and then different people who were members of St. Joseph's, and then later Holy Spirit who would come up. You see the thing that was important is that the members of Holy Spirit were the ones who integrated St. Peter Claver. There's only one family who came from St. Joseph's, so I think of it as, you know, 1970 when all of that started taking place. Pre that was still mission and kind of independent from all the other churches. Now depending on what mass... Did y'all make it to a mass?

Jane: Not yet.

Muriel: Well, we have Saturday at 5:30, which people call the old peoples mass, but it's mainly for those who don't want to get up on Sunday. That's really what it's for. Then you have the 9 o' clock mass, which is the one I grew up going to the majority of the time, which was really the old peoples' mass. People that were cousins of my grandmother and so forth were there, and these were people in their 80's and 90's. I miss that now. Looking over, everyone had their pew. I don't know about y'all's church,

but everybody had their own pew. That pew to the 4th was Ms. Thomas' pew and my family sat on the left-hand side, 5th row from the front. My mom on this end and me on this end, and my siblings sat in the middle, so we could toss them back and forth I guess. I mean everybody had their seat. So it was very stable. Everyone knew where everyone sat and so forth. That is what today is, the Gospel mass. Then of course you have the 11:15 mass, which is kind of more for young families who have children and are trying to get them ready. I attend, I have attended all of the masses except for the Hispanic mass, and sometimes I sit there and it's like, where are all the black people. There is always more whites, but then I remember there is a convention going on in Savannah or something. I would say we are getting closer now in the parish. If we had to do just black and white numbers, not Hispanic numbers, I would say we are probably 75-80% black and 20-25% white. Now the Hispanic mass is huge. It's at 1:15 but it never starts at 1:15.

Melissa: We're always late.

Muriel: You may still be early. Um, it's packed. There are so many. We're getting ready to have confirmation and first communion and at this point, because of the language barriers, we have CCD classes for the Hispanics and then the CCD classes for everyone else. But when we get finished, you can have as many as 20-30 children to adults because there are so many Hispanic families who have moved around trying to find work that they never completed all of their sacraments. Probably, let's see, if I had to do just a pie chart of all of them it's probably 20% Hispanic, 20% white and 60% black. There are a lot of people who are on the rolls that are sick and can't come in and others who as far as they're concerned may not attend but that's still their parish.

Melissa: Do they speak Spanish there or do they try to? Or do they just do English.

Muriel: I don't know if Father Dan is, but Father Adam is supposed to be in Spanish.

Julian: So is it in English with translators? Or is the mass in Spanish?

Muriel: We try to have a priest who can speak Spanish as well.

Julian: So are they both preaching simultaneously or...

Muriel: No, it's in Spanish. We have bilingual misilets, one page is Spanish and one page is English. I mean if y'all want to go, I will go to the 1:15 and meet you there. The thing that is interesting is the progression of the masses and that's just more of a thing. It used to be at 7 and 9, and Father Galvin said by the time he died he knew people would be going to mass at 12 and 1 because people were getting lazy. And now we are up to 9, 11:15, and it used to be 11 but the 9 o'clock people stay and talk, and you see the interaction of the parishioners more, black and white everybody there. We do have some Hispanic members who come, and we also have some Phillipino. This is something I've talked about to get a better breakdown, but people won't return their parish census

records. We have families from Nigeria. We have Dr. Catner, he works with the AIDS program here. He's a member there. I have a tendency to just sit in different places and watch to see the variety of people who are attending. 9 o'clock is a little more spaced, the 11 o'clock is sometimes so packed they just scrunch up and one person will sit forward so the other person can sit back. Then I'm very un-Christian like if I see one of my friends with her kids, I sit elsewhere because they are very distracting. They are very bad kids. I don't know what else to do about them. We remind them that we have a daycare downstairs for children, and they just sit there with them. And I'm thinking I am turning old because I remember when my mom had a switch and then you were dared to cry.

Jane: So if you had to recommend a service we should go to?

Muriel: To get the variety, 11 is the gospel, 11:15 is more contemporary with the music because the sermon and the readings will be the same. It's just the people and the way the mass is done. Cindy is the choir director for the 1:15. What's happening is the reason it never starts on time is that the people work all week and haven't seen each other, so they start socializing, and Father is waiting inside for them to get in. It just depends on what you're really interested in.