

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD BETHEL

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins the second interview session with Dr. Leonard L. Bethel, on April 13, 2021, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much, Dr. Bethel, for sitting down with us again.

Leonard Bethel: Sure.

SI: To begin, I wanted to talk about your various roles at Rutgers over the years. Your first job at the university was the Urban University Program.

LB: Yes. It was the Urban University Program, which in one year became the Urban University Department. I first taught for a semester at the old Somerset County College, which became Raritan Valley Community College. I taught the first African American history course there. It was an interesting experience. When I started teaching the course, I thought I walked into the wrong classroom. Sitting in the class were all middle-aged white women taking African American history. There were no Black students present. It was such an interesting semester.

At the same time, during my SCC experience, things were very active on the Rutgers campus. Black students were protesting and demanding a program in African and African American Studies. I became part of that argument in 1970. The Urban University Program was first housed in the basement of the Graduate School of Education because the dean at the time was very open. Dean Milton Schwebel of the Rutgers GSE hired Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor in 1968. Dr. Proctor was hired as the first Martin Luther King Chair at Rutgers, and he taught the first African American history courses at the graduate level at the Rutgers School of Education. They were titled "Issues in Afro-American Studies I and II" (i.e., fall and spring course). Proctor also taught the course "Moral Issues in Higher Education."

I was hired as Director of Counseling for UUP. In 1970, I was hired as Assistant Instructor in what was established as the African and Afro-American Studies Program, which the students demanded. All of this activity occurred after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. I was well prepared for the teaching job. I had taken a course in Negro history in college; that was what it was called then. I had taught African American students from Oxford High School when I directed the student center at Lincoln University. I taught them Negro history. Then, with the African American history course at Somerset County College, I was one of the few people really prepared, not just through experience but academically, to teach African American history. This is the reason I was hired in 1970 at Rutgers College to teach in the new African and African American Studies Program.

The program started as the African and African American History Program. They hired a man as an advisor, and the dean appointed me to teach the introductory course. Rutgers was a division of colleges under a federated structure: Rutgers College, Livingston College, Douglass College. The African and Afro-American Studies Program at Livingston started at the same time as the Rutgers program. The program at Douglass did not start until about 1971-'72. Of course, that was as a result of the effort of the Black women. They pushed to get African American Studies, and they hired a few scholars.

There were just actually two of us in the program at Rutgers College in 1970. Rutgers opened up to Black students in 1969. The college developed what was called a "Transitional Year Program" (TYP) for African American students who resided in New Jersey. This was all a result of the protests by the small number of black students prior to 1970. This kind of activity went on in colleges all across the country after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Then, the Urban University Program was established for Black residents of New Brunswick, NJ. I went out, literally, door to door, trying to get graduates of New Brunswick High School to enroll in this program. Admission was based on a letter of recommendation. We had a little staff who helped with all the academic issues. When I started teaching an intro course to Afro-American Studies in 1970, as former Director of Counseling in UUP, it was easy to get students to enroll in the course. I had over two hundred students sign up for that course. Of course, these were primarily Rutgers College African American students, because Livingston had its own program, and Douglass came along a little later and had its own program. Things on campus were kind of tough. It was the protest years, and the African American students protested.

I was employed at Rutgers College with a dual responsibility. Not only was I hired as Director of Counseling and an assistant instructor, I was admitted to a second master's program at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary. I had three choices. The program just started--a Master's of Arts in Theology. I was actually admitted to a master's/doctorate program, and I had a choice of three doctorates. This was all worked out with Rutgers. I could have gotten a Ph.D. in psychology; a Doctor of Social Work in the School of Social Work; or a Doctor of Education in the School of Education. In the School of Education, there was Dr. James Wheeler, the pragmatist and existentialist, and Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, theologian and Africana scholar. With the philosophy and emphasis on Afro-American Studies, I made my choice to study in the School of Education. Interestingly enough, New Brunswick Theological Seminary historically came out of the Reformed Church of America. They tried to open up and become inclusive because it was predominantly white and all male. They did not admit women at that time into the ministry, but with the creation of a M.A. program in 1968-'69, there were three of us first admitted. One was a white female who went into the M.A./Ph.D. program in psychology at NBTS and Rutgers graduate school; and a Rabbi who took the Doctor of Social Work and the M.A. program at NBTS. I took the NBTS M.A. and the Ed.D. at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. The three of us kind of made history at New Brunswick Seminary and were the first in this joint program of NBTS and Rutgers.

I was working on my doctorate, a master's/doctorate in the School of Ed. I was prepared to take a rank in the faculty. At the same time, the protest movement was happening on campus against the Vietnam War. White students were marching up and down College Ave. in New Brunswick. My wife and I had two children. My daughter was born at Lincoln University when I was on the staff there, and my son was four years old. We lived in what was called the Seminary House, right there at the corner of College Avenue and Seminary Place. The seminary had a residence there, and that was actually our second residence after being married. Right across the street was a fraternity house. On Saturday nights, we did not go to sleep. Rutgers College was all male, and after the football games, it was loud on College Avenue. The Rutgers College students would march past our house protesting the Vietnam War on College Avenue. My wife and I and our kids joined them. We did not agree with everything the students did. For example, they almost set the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] building on fire. They called it ROT-C

[pronounced rot-see]. That was an active, active time on campus, believe me. Then, there were protestors, people who came in from New Brunswick, who protested against the student protestors, who supported the war. Rutgers College campus was a sea of activity. There were also Black students protesting, which made Rutgers a very active place. Changes occurred as a result of the protests.

SI: At that time, were African American students coming to you for advice and ideas on how they might express themselves?

LB: They were the ones responsible for setting us up, but they also asked for guidance. We taught courses, and they asked for guidance about other things because they were interested, for example, in getting Paul Robeson's name somewhere on campus. They were interested in the football stadium being named after him. They were interested in having a building named after him on campus, and that was a struggle and they protested about that. Eventually, they got a room in the Student Center on College Avenue called the Paul Robeson Room. Then, they started the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, and it was right off one of those streets right there near the Student Center. I cannot remember the names of all the streets. It was right near College Avenue, where African American students could have their extracurricular activity dealing with social issues, discussions, and so on. But they came to the few faculty for advice. I think that I was the first African American at Rutgers College to move up from assistant instructor to a senior rank, going through the whole process to reach tenure, and served on the Rutgers faculty for forty-two years. [Editor's Note: The Paul Robeson Cultural Center was established in 1969 as the "Black House" at 17 Bartlett Street on the College Avenue Campus of Rutgers University-New Brunswick. In 1972, it was renamed in honor of Paul Robeson. Since 1992, it has been located on the Busch Campus, adjacent to the Busch Student Center.]

We began to see changes during the 1970s. Women started to make demands for coming into the Rutgers College setting as opposed to Douglass. Livingston College was an open campus itself, dealing with social issues. Livingston started as an urban college. The years of the '70s were very active and actually very productive in terms of social change and interaction. Rutgers was a very interesting place then. When you look at Rutgers College, for example, during the 1950s, there were no Black students at that time. There were no Black faculty or staff in the 1950s. It was all white male at Rutgers College at that time. The student protest movement made changes in the late 1960s and 1970s. Things were happening on the Newark Campus and the Camden Campus also. We were still separate. We were a federated structure back then, and it was not so easy to come together as one, i.e., the New Brunswick Rutgers campuses and Newark and Camden.

SI: Was there any cooperation at first between the Livingston College department and the Rutgers College department and then Douglass College department when it got started?

LB: The African faculties from the three campuses met in 1971. We met in Scott Hall on the Rutgers College Campus. I was a part of that meeting. The chair and faculty members of all three departments got together to talk about changing our name from African and Afro-American Studies to Africana Studies. We were concerned about unifying the African, Caribbean and American experiences into one common focus, therefore "Africana." We came up with the idea

that Africana was the best word to use for that. We all agreed that we should move from African and Afro-American Studies to Africana Studies. We functioned right up to 1980 as three separate departments. We met and tried to cooperate, but we had three different functions based on the missions of each campus. Most of the students at Douglass College were women. It was a women's college. They had courses like "The Black Woman" and so on. Then, Livingston had its own structure with its own courses. They were a little different than the courses at Rutgers College.

Now, interestingly enough, we were able to start what was called the Paul Robeson Scholar's Program within the department at Rutgers College. Livingston went on and expanded that and had the Paul Robeson Scholar for the whole college. Anybody meeting the standards became a Paul Robeson Scholar at Livingston College. By 1980, the faculties of the three colleges in New Brunswick were talking about unifying. I guess there was pressure from the state legislature and the governor's office to try to unify things in terms of resources. Rutgers was talking about expanding its travel from campus to campus to make it more accessible, because it was difficult going over the bridge back and forth from Livingston College to Rutgers College. There was a small bridge there, and the traffic was terrible going back and forth, especially when there were football games. In order for resources to be allocated for travel, they started talking about this unification. In 1980, the faculties got together and agreed to form a Faculty of Arts and Sciences, unifying the disciplines on the three campuses into one and finding locations for each of the disciplines. They could be either located at Rutgers College or at Douglass or Livingston.

We were in Van Dyck Hall at Rutgers College for ten years (i.e., 1970-1980). In 1980, the three departments got together and we voted, and they chose me for their first chair for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in Africana Studies. We were given a location in the building Beck Hall. We had all three floor levels to expand, and we were slowly developing with added faculty and getting resources. All that took a lot of politicizing and negotiating. Faculty lines were hard to get. We certainly had the numbers in terms of students taking our courses. Looking back, we remained, in the beginning, for two to three years, a program--the Afro-American Studies Program, but when we became Africana Studies--and that was another thing the students protested about--we were accepted as a legitimate degree-granting department with a major. We established a process to meet requirements for a major.

SI: You have done a lot on Paul Robeson. When did that start for you? What do you find interesting about Robeson's life?

LB: Well, for me, personally, the whole idea of Paul Robeson started at Lincoln University, not at Rutgers. I established him as one of my heroes as a student at Lincoln University because his father, Reverend William Robeson, and William Robeson, Jr., Paul's older brother, were graduates of Lincoln University. When Reverend William Robeson came to the Lincoln University campus, he was a run-away slave. He earned the requirements for entrance and became a student. He graduated from Lincoln. He went on to theological school at Lincoln. Lincoln was under the Presbyterian Church, and upon graduation from seminary, he became an ordained Presbyterian minister. He pastored at the Witherspoon Presbyterian Church in Princeton, about two blocks from the main gate of Princeton University. Paul Robeson was a little boy. I read *Here I Stand* (Paul Robeson's autobiography) when I was a college student.

Then, when I heard about Rutgers and when I got an opportunity for a second master's and getting on the staff at Rutgers, I said, "I'm going to Paul Robeson's school." The idea of Paul Robeson was with me long before I came to Rutgers.

The Langston Hughes Memorial Library on the campus of Lincoln University, PA has as much material on Paul Robeson as the Alexander Library of Rutgers because the family sent stuff over there also. The idea of Paul Robeson excelling in sports certainly was a motivation for me playing sports at Lincoln. Paul Robeson was such an outstanding athlete and scholar. I was motivated to follow his image. When Robeson graduated from Rutgers in the Class of 1919, most people thought that he went on to Columbia Law School to study law. Well, he did not. He joined Fritz Pollard at Lincoln on the coaching staff. Pollard was the first Black All-American at Brown University. Rutgers played football against Brown and Paul Robeson played against Fritz Pollard as an undergraduate student. Fritz Pollard was a year ahead of Paul Robeson, when he graduated from Brown. He was appointed as head football coach at Lincoln in 1918-1919. He had convinced Paul to join him after graduation from Rutgers in 1919 as his assistant football coach at Lincoln University. Paul coached football at Lincoln from 1919 to 1920, and then he went on to law school. In those two years, 1919 and 1920, Lincoln had the strongest football team in the CIAA. They were the strongest HBCU football team. [Editor's Note: Fritz Pollard coached Lincoln University's football team from 1918 to 1920. Lincoln's record during that period was 10-2-1. In 1918, Lincoln finished first in the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) and went on in 1919 to tie for first place. The CIAA is a NCAA Division II collegiate athletic conference mostly comprised of historically black colleges and universities (HBCU).]

I played four years of football at Lincoln. As you know, I was inducted into the athletic hall of fame at Lincoln in 2011. I heard about this great Paul Robeson and Fritz Pollard, who coached Lincoln's team back in 1919, 1920, and '21. They were both such outstanding athletes in college and had such an outstanding records. Of course, Fritz Pollard left Lincoln and went on and became the first Black professional football coach. He tried to get Paul to leave law school to come to help him coach professional football, but Paul wanted to stick with law. Of course, when he got out of law school, Columbia Law School in New York, he went into a white law firm in New York, but it was not productive for him. He could not get clients. Most Black people could not afford a lawyer, and he was not getting white clientele. So, he got on the stage and took his Rutgers skill with him, singing in the Glee Club, put that experience to his ability on stage, singing and acting. Robeson was a role model. Over the years, I got a chance to speak seven times at the Witherspoon Presbyterian Church at Princeton, where Paul's father, the Rev. William Robeson, was pastor. When I stood up in the pulpit, I could see the first stained glass window on the left had "Reverend William Robeson and Family" name. The Robeson family lived right down the street from the church. The idea of Paul Robeson was always a great inspiration to Africana Studies at Rutgers. I am presently writing the history of the department.

SI: How did you see a change in general in the first ten years or so before it became one department? How did the Rutgers College department change over that time?

LB: Well, adding on faculty was a very important thing to do. You cannot run a department with two people. We picked up a third after the first year (i.e., 1970) and then a fourth in the

following year. Then, within a few years, we picked up a few lecturers. It was difficult getting funds to pay people. It was a financial challenge, getting funds to pay people and appointing them as visiting lecturers part time, and then trying to get a full-time line. We certainly had the numbers in terms of students taking our courses. We only taught a few courses because there were only a few faculty. Those were rough years (i.e., 1970-1980) for me because I did not earn my doctorate until 1975, and there I was, teaching over four hundred students. I taught the first introductory course in the department, which attracted the largest number of students to the department.

I was trying to get the department going, and it became very difficult in 1973-'74 when the department advisor at the time, Harold Weaver, left Rutgers. He was chairing the department, and I was made acting chair. From then on, I chaired the discipline for fifteen years. I think 1974-'75 were the most difficult for the department because we were able to hire a few people. We hired Dr. Momodou Manneh, who was the first Black to earn a Ph.D. in Political Science at Rutgers College. He team-taught the intro course with me. He got into politics in The Gambia, West Africa, where he was from. He was a Muslim and ran for the presidency. He had to leave Rutgers when he earned his Ph.D., and I was sort of stuck there alone. One semester there, I was the only faculty person for the department, teaching all the courses to keep the department alive. At the same time, I finished a doctoral dissertation and had family responsibilities.

Of course, my wife was also studying at the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers. She ended up as a professor at the Raritan Valley Community College. She was the first full-time director of the daycare center there and organized the early childhood education program. Veronica earned her master's and ABD [all but dissertation] doctorate from the Rutgers School of Education in early childhood education. We lived on campus in graduate housing. Those were rough days for us. Not much money was coming in, and it was a financial challenge. If it was not for scholarship money, we would have been in trouble.

I kept the Department of Africana going as department chair in 1974-'75. Dr. Sylvanus Cooley, a well-known Nigerian historian, was hired as full-time chair in 1975 with a joint appointment with the History Department and Africana Studies. When he came on, money was allocated and he was able to help add on a few teaching lines. We began to grow from '75, '76, '77, '78. I was able to establish courses in my area of study. I had two theology degrees and a philosophy of education degree, so I established two courses in philosophy and two courses in religion. I believe they were kind of the first ones in the country. One was called "Black Religion." The other was called "Black Theology." The philosophy courses were a seminar on philosophy in Africana Studies and "Black Thought." I also started a course called "Black Education."

Interestingly enough, Dr. Samuel Proctor was chair of my doctoral dissertation committee. He and Dr. James Wheeler guided me in the area, philosophy of education. Dr. Proctor had spent some years over there, and he had a lot of graduate students. He was responsible for at least four college presidents, educating them and earning their doctorates and going on as presidents of colleges. When he retired, he was given a roving professorship and they asked him where did he want to teach in the university. I was chairing Africana Studies at that time (circa 1978). Dr. Proctor decided to join Africana Studies. He decided to teach the course "Black Education." When Dr. Proctor started to teach the course, he changed the title to "The History of Black

Education in the United States." He was able to attract a large number of students. Proctor was a master teacher and a master lecturer. He was awarded over sixty honorary degrees from colleges and universities. He was a well-known educator and theologian. He became pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. It was the largest Black Baptist Church in the country and had over ten thousand members. It gave Africana Studies a little boost to have his name associated with us.

By the time we were able to move over to Livingston, Dr. Proctor came over with us and had his own office over there. When we joined together with Livingston and Douglass--I guess there was a program on its way in Newark and in Camden--we were pretty well established within the university. Serving in the department chair in the early 1980s was physically challenging for me. I started to have physical problems. I had major surgery in 1990, and I spent three months in the hospital. So, I had to give up some things. Before my surgery, I was also head pastor (part time) of the Bethel Presbyterian Church in Plainfield, New Jersey (not named after me). I worked out an agreement with Rutgers for the church job. The church started in 1883 because "Bethel" in Hebrew means "House of God." Beth is house; El is God. So, Bethel Presbyterian Church had me as their head pastor, and I worked there for ten years to build it up while I was teaching.

When Rutgers had breaks--first, it was Easter and then spring break and so on--I had to work. That was the busiest time for church activity, Easter Sunday service and all of this kind of business. Christmas was busy. I had no holidays. Life was very busy for me building up the discipline (i.e., Africana Studies). We got on our way to be accepted as a legitimate part of the Rutgers University program.

We also set the pace for programs that started to emerge in the late 1970s and early '80s. Hebraic Studies started. Islamic Studies started. Women's Studies started. We set the pattern for this kind of education. They came after us, and those areas opened up. Women's Studies became a big program at Douglass, getting their own faculty together. The same was true with Hebraic Studies and Islamic Studies. I think in the '80s or '90s, Asian Studies started. In all of these areas, we were the first to have this kind of disciplinary focus, and then came these other areas representing other groups, which was good.

We had to fight along the way. When we in Africana Studies became a part of the School of Arts and Sciences, one dean wanted to bring us all together. He wanted to throw us all in one and have American Studies with African, Islamic, Hebrew, and Women's Studies. Each of us put up a strong argument, saying that, "We have a different focus in each area. We were unique in each area. You just cannot throw different cultural experiences together, knowing that there's a different historical pattern with each of them." It would have hurt our curriculum focus. We won our argument, but he was very clear about what we should become. The argument was, "There would be more financial resources for us as one unit." We said, "That's not realistic to the reality of the history, the psychology and sociology of each of our disciplines." So, we managed to keep it the way it is now.

SI: Going back to Bethel in Plainfield, what attracted you to take up the ministry? How did that opportunity come along?

LB: Well, I don't know if you remember, I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1964. I became assistant chaplain at Lincoln University while I was director of counseling for the Institute for Services to Education and director of the student center. I always tried to keep my membership in the Presbyterian Church because there were very few Blacks. Getting through the requirements for the Presbyterian ministry was no joke. You had to take Hebrew and Greek languages. There was an examination after seminary graduation. The Presbytery that you belonged to required post-graduation written examinations. I went through the Presbytery of Donegal in Chester County, PA, which was out in the Lincoln University area. The majority of the men in Donegal were Princeton seminary graduates. I had to take a written exam in Hebrew, a written exam in Greek, and a written exam in Reformed theology. Other written blue-book exams included bible and exegesis. These written exams had to be passed before one could be ordained and installed in the church. I passed all requirements and became ordained.

I was ordained in 1964. I came to Rutgers in 1969 as an ordained Presbyterian minister. When I came to Rutgers, I transferred my membership from the Presbytery of Donegal to the Presbytery of New Brunswick. In the Presbytery of New Brunswick, there was only one African American church, the Witherspoon Presbyterian Church in Princeton, NJ, which was Paul Robeson's father's old church.

My counseling and my work at Rutgers counted as my ministry. I joined the Bethel Presbyterian Church as pastor in 1982 (i.e., a special contract worked out with Rutgers). During the '70s, I did something unique. I worked on something with the chaplain at Rutgers College. As you know, when I first came to Rutgers, Rutgers College had a chaplain. Rutgers College still had links to the Reformed Church of America. I was able to perform student weddings in Kirkpatrick Chapel, and that expanded to St. Michael's Chapel on the Busch Campus and then Voorhees Chapel at Douglass. So, I performed a lot of student weddings. That was my link to my membership in the Presbytery because you had to do something with the church to keep membership. I could not accept a full-time contract, but I would accept a part-time arrangement with Rutgers when I became pastor of Bethel Presbyterian Church in Plainfield, NJ. So, I worked my tail off pastoring a church and chairing Africana Studies.

I stayed with the Bethel Presbyterian Church in Plainfield, NJ as pastor from 1982 to 1992. I had to stop pastoring after a ten-year period, and that's when I had major surgery. I had a major artery break and burst. It was from my old college football injury. Also my full-time work at Rutgers made me have a physical challenge. Church and school was too much. I was not sleeping that much. I spent three months in Overlook Hospital and had major surgery, removing arteries. It took me a long time to recover. When I returned to Rutgers, the dean, at the time, for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, who eventually moved to the School of Arts and Sciences, said, "Listen, Bethel, you do not need to travel over to the College Avenue Campus ..." (i.e. I was a Fellow of Rutgers College). I was also awarded the Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Princeton. He said, "Listen, we'll put all your courses in Beck Hall, on the Livingston College campus, where Africana Studies is housed, where your office is, until you get yourself stronger." I was weak in the beginning. I had a little trouble getting around. I could leave my office and go and teach my classes in the same building, and that was nice.

My life was full. I was a community active person. I was awarded four mayoral proclamations in Plainfield, which are hanging on the wall in my study. During that time, I won the highest teaching award at Rutgers, i.e., the Warren I. Susman Award for Teaching Excellence. I was also awarded the Distinguished Service Award from the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. I received the Paul Robeson Cultural Center Scholar Award, i.e., I was a Paul Robeson Scholar. I served on four boards of trustees of colleges and a preparatory school. My children went to the Rutgers Preparatory School near Rutgers' campus in New Brunswick. I served on the Rutgers Prep board of trustees for fourteen years. I served on the board of trustees at Lincoln University for eight years there, i.e., two terms. Then, I was appointed vice moderator of the senate of the whole Northeast Presbyterian Church. My job was to do two things: to help Nelson Mandela get out of prison and get involved in the anti-apartheid movement and serve on the board of trustees at Bloomfield College, which was supported by the Elizabeth Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church, where I was a member. I served on the board of trustees there for two terms. I served also on the Union County College Board of Trustees for two terms. My life was busy.

SI: You were also doing some writing and research during that time.

LB: Oh, yes. Writing became a passion of mine, and I published a book called *Africana: An Introduction and Study*. It was an edited work, a seven-hundred-page work. It was used for five years as required reading in the introductory course in Africana Studies. Then, I co-authored two books with a reporter from *The Star-Ledger* newspaper. Frederick Johnson was a Second World War veteran and a reporter for Negro military affairs. I preached the eulogy at his funeral when he passed away. We published together two books, one on the history of the Frontiers International, the service organization that has over forty-five chapters in America and Africa. It was titled *Advancement Through Service: A History of the Frontiers International*, and then we co-authored a book, *Plainfield's African American: From Northern Slavery to Church Freedom*. We have seven historical Black churches that came out of the 1800s, and ours was one, at Bethel Presbyterian. Fred was also a member of my church. Then, I published a book on Lincoln University, *Educating African Leaders: Missionism in America*. Then, I published--there was a husband-and-wife team who were outstanding educators in New Jersey--Westry and Dorothy Horne. They were just well known in New Jersey. They were on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and they were just highly respected. Robeson worked for Westry Horn when he was director of the Christian Street YMCA in South Philadelphia. Robeson worked for Westry for a year when he was a student at Rutgers. So, I wrote a book on them, *The Hornes of Plainfield: A Hermeneutical View of African American Life*. There is presently in press at Lincoln University Press my next book, titled *Midst Glory and Honor: The Spirit of Lincoln University, PA*. It is a book about the history of sport at Lincoln.

I am presently writing *The History of Africana at Rutgers University, NJ*. That's how I have spent my retired years, writing and publishing. Also, Lincoln University Press appointed me (i.e., not a salaried position) as associate editor of the press and journal. I have published a number of articles in the *Lincoln University Journal of Social and Political Thought*. This is how I spend my time, outside of taking care of my wife. Our children are grown and live in other states. Both of them have their own families. We have five grandchildren. In fact, all five grandchildren are in college right now. I occupy my time writing, and I have a couple of other

books in mind as long as I am alive and taking care of my wife. She lives with chronic pain from a beating that she took from a Ku Klux Klansman.

My mother was an educator. She earned her doctorate from Rutgers, and she taught English at the old Trenton State as a lecturer. My father died in 1971. She owned two acres of land out here in Doylestown, PA and built a house on it. She only spent summers there because she was teaching and was also home caring for her parents in Philadelphia, PA. When I retired, I moved out to her property and renovated the place for my retirement. I have a fellow cut an acre of grass. I cannot do any cutting anymore, not at age eighty-two. It's very quiet out here in Doylestown.

What keeps me going and keeps me busy is my writing and publishing. I have published with Kendall Hunt Press, the University Press of America, and now I am publishing my works with Lincoln University Press. My present manuscript is being typed up now by a person who is a staff member at the Lincoln Press, for publication. As I mentioned before, it is on the spirit and history of sports at Lincoln University, PA. I spent a lot of time writing [about] the spirit and the history of sport there because I was inducted in the athletic hall of fame at Lincoln for achievement in three sports that I excelled in, and they have a banner with my picture on it in the gymnasium. My present manuscript is one on Africana. I am going to try to get Rutgers Press to publish it. Rutgers Press has not been that open to Africana for some reason. My colleagues have all had trouble publishing with them. I said I will try to publish my present work about Rutgers' Africana. If Rutgers Press will not publish it, I'm associated with a press here, Lincoln University will.

I have two other books in mind. My wife and I started writing our autobiography. I wrote about my early years and had to stop. She's having difficulty writing her early years; it was so painful growing up in a segregated town in North Carolina. Little girls going through high school in her town could not get jobs in a store. They only could be domestics, and they were not treated well by the people they worked for. There were a lot of social problems growing up in her town. My wife Veronica has difficulty writing about it. I set my written pages aside, temporarily, until she is ready to write. I said, "Whenever you feel strength enough to do it, jot down a few words." I even bought her one of those Dragon discs [speech recognition software] you put on the computer, where you can sit and talk and it prints out, but mentally, she's not ready. Once she can get through the childhood part, then we both can sit down and talk about when we met, when I was a student in theological school. Looking back at our experiences, we got married before she graduated from college, and we lived in married housing in a trailer on campus. The trailer was owned by a professor. We graduated the same year (i.e., 1964). I earned a Master's of Divinity degree and she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Veronica and I have been married for fifty-nine years (i.e., 1962-2021). She did not start to have trouble (i.e., pain) until around 2000, where this bone started to splinter where she had her injury in the neck spinal cord. She had major surgery, and that did not help her at all--plates in her neck and spinal cord, screws and bone from her hip and a cadaver bone. She has been suffering with chronic pain since. She is now eighty years old. We do the best we can. We do not bother our children much because they were so busy. They are both very productive. Our son is a neurosurgeon; our daughter is a lawyer. Our son was just appointed head neurosurgeon over the

surgeons and neurosurgeons at a Scranton hospital. He left Maryland, where he was chief neurosurgeon. My daughter's husband is a lawyer. He finished Penn Law School and has an MBA from Wharton. He was a lead attorney for the Charlotte Hornets. They lived in Charlotte up until this past year, in North Carolina. He has just been appointed as the head attorney for the Atlanta Falcons football team and the soccer team in Atlanta, GA. They now live in Atlanta, GA. Our daughter just got appointed as vice president of the Woodruff Arts Center museum and theater in Atlanta, Georgia. So, their lives are busy. They are paying heavy tuitions; all their kids are in college. My daughter has twins. She has three children, and my son has two. They are all in college. They are making salaries we never made, and they can pay for their children's tuition to the expensive colleges that they attend.

It's just my wife and I. I write, and I try to keep her busy doing things. Up until last year, I spent time swimming for exercise. My wife likes to walk now and then. I was on the swim team in high school, and I was pretty good. We did not have a swim team at Lincoln. I wrestled after football season. I was on the wrestling team. Now, in my senior years, swimming has become my major activity, and I have not been able to swim for a year, since last March, when we were affected by coronavirus. The YMCA that I attended closed down. I miss swimming. It has been the best for my health, and I have not been able to do it because of COVID-19. Now and then, I get out with my wife, and we walk. We live near a lake, which has a walking path around it. We also live near a Roman Catholic shrine, where it has a circular walking path that we take advantage of. Walking is the best thing that I can do now, but I love swimming the best.

I think what always bothers me, because I love watching swimming, I always got bothered when I notice that very few to no African American swimmers are at the competitive level. That problem exists because there were never swimming pools in the Black neighborhoods. We still have to open up and be more inclusive in this area, and we have not been. So, it's still a challenge. I still love watching Olympic swimming however and hope one day swimming competition will become more inclusive. African Americans can swim also. There was no swimming pool in my neighborhood in West Philadelphia. We had to get on a train and a bus to go to the Christian Street YMCA in South Philadelphia on Saturday. That was a good distance away. That was the only place where they had a swimming pool for Blacks. My father, from the Caribbean, was a fanatic about swimming. We would go to Wildwood, NJ in the summer to the beach when my brother and I were small, and our father threw us in the water at the beach to swim. My mother would get furious at him. He was born on the beach in Nassau, Bahamas. So, he figured if you can walk, you can naturally swim.

My brother and I did not learn the correct method of swimming. Around ages ten or eleven years, we got to the Christian Street YMCA in South Philadelphia. There was Frank "Tick" Coleman, the first Black all-conference quarterback at Central High School in Philadelphia and a top swimmer. He was also an All-Conference athlete alumnus of Lincoln University. Coleman directed the Christian Street YMCA. He taught my brother and I the proper technique for competitive swimming. As a result, when I got to high school, the only two Blacks to make the swim team was my cousin, Lowell Bethel, whose father was also from the Bahamas, and myself. My high school swim coach asked me how I knew how to swim. He said, "I don't know any colored guys who can swim." But I could swim so well. It was difficult coming out of football to get in shape for swimming. My muscles were built up in my neck and my shoulders due to

football training. As a football tackle, I had to build up my neck muscles so I would not get injured.

When we had swim tryouts at Central High, there were seventy guys that tried out, and there were only two Blacks, Lowell Bethel and myself. Lowell became a professor of biology at the University of Texas-Houston. He died two years ago. He and I got out there, and he said, "Bethel, we've got to keep up our Bethel name." It was a crawl race, and forty guys had to be eliminated. The coach would only take thirty swimmers on the team. Lowell said, "Bethel, if we are going to be the only Blacks on the team, we have to beat out forty guys." Well, I don't care how tight I was in my neck; when I swam that fifty-yard sprint, I made the team. I beat out forty guys, and Lowell Bethel did also. So, I was a member of the swim team for two years. Interestingly enough, the best swimmer on the team was Richard Bethel, B-E-T-H-E-L. His father came from the Bahamas. I told you that story before, did I not?

SI: I have some questions about your time at Rutgers. First, can you tell me about the development of the graduate department in the discipline?

LB: How we started the graduate program?

SI: Yes.

LB: Well, I think what happened was our first link to the graduate study was with the School of Education. I think what happened with that was, Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor had passed away, and they had put his courses on Afro-American issues and his "Moral Issues in Higher Education" on the master course list. There was nobody scheduled to teach them. I went over, and I said, "Listen, I teach African American history, and I am an ordained minister. I know issues in higher education. Can I teach his courses?" So, they appointed me as an associate member of the faculty at the Graduate School of Ed. I began teaching Dr. Proctor's courses and getting a lot of graduate students. Then, a discussion started to take place, and a link between the undergraduate program in Africana and the Grad School of Ed took place. A joint relationship between the Rutgers Department of Africana Studies and the Rutgers Graduate School of Education formalized and became reality over a period of maybe a couple years of discussion. You can now earn a Master's of Education in the GSE Department of Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education and Africana Studies. Then, Dr. Kim Butler, an Africana Studies professor, who is an historian and who, at the time, chaired the discipline, she also held a joint line in the Rutgers History Department. She worked on a graduate relationship between Africana Studies and history and developed an association there with the master's program in the Department of History and Africana Studies. We do not have a doctorate yet in Africana, but we have two masters levels. However, an Africana Studies major can earn the master's degree in the Rutgers Graduate School of Education and be admitted to the GSE doctorate program. The Department of Africana Studies at Rutgers is strong and will, eventually, stabilize a doctorate degree program.

SI: I am also curious about your work in anti-apartheid efforts, both with your church but also if you were involved in any efforts along those lines at Rutgers or with the New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

LB: Yes, I was. One of the things, Elias Tema, who headed up the Black Reformed Church in South Africa and became the head pastor of the Black Reformed Church in Soweto, South Africa, was over Desmond Tutu in the Reformed Church. He was the second Black to finish with a Master's of Arts in Theology from New Brunswick Seminary in 1972. I was the first in 1971. When he was studying, I remember him having to go back and bury the children in the Soweto riots who fought against apartheid. They were members of his church. [Editor's Note: On June 16, 1976, as students peacefully protested in Soweto, South Africa against apartheid and educational restrictions, police opened fire, killing two students and injuring hundreds. The shootings led to a massive uprising in Soweto and galvanized international support for the anti-apartheid movement.]

Tema and I took part in making sure that New Brunswick Theological Seminary would open up its doors to Blacks because of its connection with South Africa, i.e., the South African Reformed Church, since NBTS was a Reformed Church program. It eventually did. It was a slow process. Sam Proctor taught a course there. I became, at one time, director of the alumni association. NBTS took a position in support of Nelson Mandela being removed from the jail. The seminary was also confronted, which is interesting, with James Farmer, a Black social activist, who made demands for reparations from the seminary and the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. He came to the New Brunswick Seminary and marched in on a staff meeting and demanded reparations. There was a special anniversary of that event after fifty years, at which I presented a paper on James Farmer's protest efforts at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

It's so interesting how that seminary changed. Now, the president of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary is African American, Rev. Dr. Micah L. McCreary, Ph.D. Since the beginning of the Doctor of Ministry program at NBTS, the majority of students earning a Doctor of Ministry degree there (of course, these students all have to have in their possession their Master's of Divinity degree), the majority of students who have earned the Doctor of Ministry degree from New Brunswick Theological Seminary, a Reformed Theological Seminary, were African American women. They were the ones who kept that program alive. Also, because of the stand that I took against apartheid, the Johnson & Johnson Company invited me over to their building in New Brunswick for a conference on South Africa. J&J had some business interest in South Africa. They actually had an operation over there. My position was that you have to find some way of getting resources out to the poor people of South Africa, the poor Blacks, and also taking a stand against the apartheid system. The J&J administrators were very supportive of doing something about apartheid in South Africa through their business interest there.

SI: Well, I also wanted to ask about the ministry in Plainfield. In general, how would you characterize your congregation? What did you see as the major changes during your ten years there?

LB: Well, one of the things that I wanted to do was (i.e., the church was suffering financially) to get them off of national missions and to increase the outreach of the church and how it affected the town and its sense of inclusion towards social progress. I started a soup kitchen at Bethel Presbyterian, Plainfield, NJ. We fed the hungry, the poor, the homeless. I started an outreach program for youth. We had a Head Start program in the basement of our church. We also

started a basketball team that I coached. I was not a basketball player, but I was an athlete and I coached a team that played in the church league in town. We worked along with the mayor's office and tried to improve things because there was some crime activity. I connected with other African American ministers in town. We had the Black clergy united group, and we met often on how we could improve social conditions in town and how we could uplift the Black community.

One of the major things that I was able to do, I met with Plainfield's mayor, who happened to be African American and a Baptist. We had a high dropout rate in the high school. Many Black males dropped out by tenth grade. It was a high number, and we said, "Listen, we need some incentive in town educationally for them to encourage the Black youth to move on." So, we (i.e., myself and another pastor) were able to work out something with Union County College to put a branch in Plainfield. One of my colleagues who earned her doctorate at Rutgers, Dr. Shirley Cathie, who was pastor of the Church of God and Christ (she had a doctorate and two masters), became the first director of that college in Plainfield to encourage African American students to go on to college by attending a community college. Interestingly enough, I was able to get my old schoolmate and football teammate Bill Cosby--I'm so sorry what has happened to him, but this was before all the issues--to come and speak to the youth of the town and he did so in the Plainfield High School Auditorium. He encouraged Black youth to attend UCC. I was on the board of Union County College. We tried really hard to encourage Black youth to attend.

Plainfield, N.J., after Martin Luther King was assassinated, had a riot, and a police sergeant was killed. There was white flight (i.e., white families just left in droves, and the houses went up for sale). Then, you had a great influx of Black families coming into Plainfield, NJ. From 1970-'80, the town turned eighty percent African American. A lot of my African American colleagues from Rutgers moved to Plainfield because of the nice houses. After 2011, the town is slowly turning Latino, so it's going into transition again.

SI: Did you ever live in Plainfield?

LB: When I was working on my doctorate, my wife and I and our two children lived in the married housing right near the football stadium. When we left the Rutgers community and I got the pastorship of the Bethel Presbyterian Church in Plainfield, NJ, we moved to Plainfield in 1975 and we left the town in 2012, when I retired from Rutgers. My wife first started teaching in an early childhood education course there. Then, she became a professor at the Raritan Valley Community College and became its first director of early childhood education and its first full-time director of the childcare center. She spent about thirty-five years in higher education, and I spent about forty-two years at Rutgers.

SI: Is there anything else we either skipped or would like to talk more about?

LB: It's interesting, I was not making plans to retire when I did in 2011. But then the dean of the School of Arts and Sciences said, "Bethel, I notice you have spent more than forty years here." I said, "Yes, I have spent forty-two." He said, "President McCormick and I are retiring at the end of this year. We know you very well. We know the work you have done. If you retire along with us, we will give you 'Professor Emeritus.' I know McCormick will get it through the

Board of Governors, and we will give you a hundred thousand dollars severance pay." I started the process, which my wife agreed to. She had already retired a few years earlier due to her ailment. She retired from RVCC after thirty-five years. We sold our home in Plainfield, NJ and moved to my mother's two-acre property in Doylestown, PA. My mother was in a nursing home, i.e., assisted living-nursing, at age ninety plus. She was wheel-chaired, and she passed away at age ninety-six in 2014. My wife and I renovated the Doylestown property and are presently spending our retirement there. President McCormick and the Rutgers Board of Governors awarded me "Professor Emeritus," and they gave me severance pay. I left in 2011, after forty-two years of service to the university.

SI: All right. Well, thank you, Professor Bethel, for talking with me over these two sessions. It has been fascinating to learn about your life and your service to Rutgers. I will conclude for now, but thank you very much.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

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