



THE ALEXANDRIA ORAL HISTORY CENTER
OFFICE OF HISTORIC ALEXANDRIA
CITY OF ALEXANDRIA



Oral History Interview

with

Michael Johnson, Pastor Lou Whiting, Reverend
Anthony Oliver, and Reverend Jason Whitley

Interviewer: Francesco De Salvatore

Narrator(s): Michael Johnson, Pastor Lou Whiting, Reverend Anthony Oliver,
Reverend Jason Whitley

Location of Interview: Oswald Durant Center, Alexandria, VA, 22314

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Transcriber: James Bowers

Summary:

Michael Johnson, Pastor Lou Whiting, Reverend Anthony Oliver, Reverend Jason Whitley discuss their first impression of religion, their religious affiliations in Alexandria, Virginia, and their childhood memories in Alexandria.

Notes:

This StoryCircle was part of the City of Alexandria's 275th Anniversary. The theme of the circle was about the history of African American churches in the City of Alexandria. Please note that there were individuals present during the interview to listen, but they were not considered narrators. Their names are Helena, Merrick, and Corey.

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General	Religion; Family; Childhood; Community
People	Woods, Richard E.
Places	Mount Jezreel Baptist Church; Ebenezer Baptist Church; My Father's House Christian Church; Frederick Douglass Memorial Cemetery; Alexandria, Virginia

Michael Johnson [00:00:00] It's a.

Merrick [00:00:00] Great city.

Corey [00:00:02] Is that fresh? Yeah. It is.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:04] You're good, you're good.

Michael Johnson [00:00:05] You're above ground.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:00:06] I'm gonna go around. You gotta go with the flow.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:12] You're good.

Corey [00:00:13] That's what I'm trying to say.

Michael Johnson [00:00:14] I tell them that every morning.

Reverend Anthony Oliver [00:00:18] And that if they print in the programs, every time you do, there's (inaudible).

Michael Johnson [00:00:24] Yeah. Cause I want to help him out definitely help him out. Remember that, get that record straight.

Merrick [00:00:29] You know the saddest thing in (inaudible)

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:41] Was it Shiloh? Yeah.

Corey [00:00:43] Well, yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:44] I feel like Lily's kind hearted.

Michael Johnson [00:00:48] Might have been, was it Elton John?

Merrick [00:00:48] I Agree with you on that.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:00:49] I thought it was. Yeah, I thought.

Michael Johnson [00:00:52] She collect that. That's good to do, though. Especially now because they got more technology. Yeah, definitely now. (inaudible).

Francesco De Salvatore [00:01:04] Yeah. Yeah, I think it was her. She was supposed to come tonight, but she got sick.

Michael Johnson [00:01:10] Miss Patterson? She up there in age too. Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:01:16] So well we'll get started. Thanks, everyone, for coming out tonight. I know it's hot and I know there's traffic and.

Reverend Anthony Oliver [00:01:23] They're voting.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:01:24] And their voting. I know I forgot, tonight was, it was voting night. I forgot. Just so, I know, I know some of you, but just so you know, I got. My name is Francesco De Salvatore, so I. I run the oral history program for the city. So my, my job is to to record stories about Alexandria from people who used to live here, people who do live here. And the idea is right, in 50, 100 years, we can go back and hopefully listen to these stories and learn from them. But in the current day, we also use these stories for exhibits. We use them for high school curriculum. Because we, you know, in other ways, because we want we want these stories to be out there in the public and for people to be learning about all these different stories. So we do these things called story circles, which is what you're what you're at tonight. And they're basically what it sounds like. We're going to probably spend about an hour or so, talking about your personal experiences. And so, I think you've, you've seen the questions and you know. There will be no surprise questions. But essentially, you know, the focus for tonight is to learn about each of you and your personal experiences with with faith, with the church that, that, that you serve at. And so, again, if you don't feel comfortable sharing something, don't don't share it.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:02:46] Some questions came from Carey?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:47] No, no, that's for your own. Yeah.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:02:50] Okay.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:51] That's for your own

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:02:52] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:53] I mean, I, I have them right here, but.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:02:56] That's fine man.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:02:57] Yeah, yeah, there's going to be.

Michael Johnson [00:02:59] Those most, most are generic.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:03:02] Probably. Yeah. So what we'll do is I'll ask the questions and we'll, we'll go around in a circle. And so the idea is to really give each person the space, to kind of share what they want. And so, you know, maybe try to avoid interjecting at times. Just let the person answer the question, then we'll move on to the next person.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:03:25] If it's if it's Michael Johnson I might have to interject.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:03:27] Well that's that. You know. Mike did these before so so Mike knows how they go. But you know.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:03:35] I am just kidding.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:03:36] But, Mike. But Mike is a way of being seen, or being heard.

Michael Johnson [00:03:41] Okay, hot dog.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:03:43] Yeah, he calls me hot dog I don't know. And so the idea is. So we are recording this, and so the idea is that this would be archived with the city. And so this will be accessible to the public, and people could read the transcript. They could watch this. And we'll talk more about that later.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:04:02] So where, where would it be archived?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:04:06] With the city and, and the Black History Museum, You know.

Michael Johnson [00:04:10] And you can access it by going online once you get it done and they.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:04:13] Yeah.

Michael Johnson [00:04:13] So so we interpret and scribe it. So you gonna have to go online and listen to it and you can also read what the person said as you go.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:04:21] Yeah and we have an online website where, you know, so you could search Ebenezer or you could search.

Michael Johnson [00:04:28] Mount Jezreel.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:04:30] Mount Jezreel And it's like, you know, this forum that.

Michael Johnson [00:04:32] Was on the map. That's pretty much what 20 years in 25, 23, 22.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:04:38] And multiply that times three. We got a count of Omar Bruce's.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:04:44] Yeah. So that that makes sense so far and good. Great. Really quick. We we have some guests. I wanna introduce maybe you guys to introduce yourselves to everyone as you know who you are.

Helena [00:04:54] Yeah. I'm Helena. This is my husband Merrick and our grandson Corey, and we actually live in Loudoun County. And, all of us have a real huge interest in history of all kinds. And I was working on, some African American history several years ago, pre-pandemic. I have a background as a teacher, and I was on the Loudoun County Planning Commission, so I saw this in the church bulletin at Saint Joseph's here, which I occasionally scan. And we have family who live just a couple of blocks from Saint Joseph's. So we thought we'd come. We expected like a panel, but this is even more interesting for me personally. Merrick's mother had an interview like this. She was in World War II as a survivor when she was 15. She was locked up in the basement of a building for three days in the darkness, no food, no water, no other people. 15 years old. You know, that's

trauma your entire life. So, and she did, a video presentation like this. Very hard to understand. But when I've seen others, I always wanted to like have questions for the people who you see on tape. So this is like really cool for us to hear you. And then maybe, you know, if we have some questions we can ask you, but you guys go ahead.

Merrick [00:06:21] The only thing I can add to that is I've always been interested in American history. All of it. Not just the selected.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:06:27] Just the plain folk.

Merrick [00:06:30] Yeah. And so. I was just telling Corey on the way down here that I read a 19th century novel about the founding of Pittsburgh. It's, it's a novel but yet you learn so much about history that you never picked up in school.

Helena [00:06:46] Yeah, yeah.

Merrick [00:06:46] And so. Same thing going to plantations next to Richmond, where we have a little place. You you learn some real history. For example, slavery was a small hiccup, of sorts. And then this one family, who owns a plantation for like 7 or 8 generations, something that never should have happened, happened. And they would. They still have an active plantation out there. Yeah. It's just amazing.

Helena [00:07:18] Oh, I've got to put a plug in. If you've never heard of Maggie Walker.

Michael Johnson [00:07:22] Oh, yeah. Richmond, Richmond.

Merrick [00:07:25] I'm telling a story I knew nothing about until I went.

Helena [00:07:27] Down there. Yeah, go. Go see her. Go see her.

Merrick [00:07:30] Happy woman. First banker.

Helena [00:07:32] And amazingly. Yeah. Absolutely amazing. But nobody up here knows about it.

Merrick [00:07:37] That's right.

Michael Johnson [00:07:38] I do, because we played Maggie Walker. Well I didn't play for them because that was before my time, but I went down to see, GW [George Washington University] play Maggie Walker in a state basketball tournament.

Helena [00:07:48] Oh, really?

Michael Johnson [00:07:49] I did learn a lot about Maggie Walker.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:07:51] Yeah, but I actually literally physically played it against Maggie.

Helena [00:07:55] Yeah. Wow. Yeah. I tell you, that woman.

Reverend Jason Whitley [00:07:59] My school and Football field right next door.

Helena [00:08:00] That's the woman deserves a statue that's 30 feet high. You know, and why people in Virginia still aren't knowing about her, but things are changing.

Merrick [00:08:09] Yeah, we, we went to the dedication of the statue.

Helena [00:08:12] Yeah. Yes, it's small.

Michael Johnson [00:08:15] And what was your family last name? Helena.

Helena [00:08:17] I'm Sista. He's Sisti. And it changes with the gender I for male and A for female.

Michael Johnson [00:08:25] It's your last name?

Helena [00:08:25] Yes, that's my name. And this is Mr. Wells.

Corey [00:08:30] My name is Corey. These are my grandparents. I'm here because life's too short to say no when your grandparents ask you to go somewhere.

Michael Johnson [00:08:38] That's true.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:08:39] That's it.

Corey [00:08:40] In this situation, I mostly grew up with my mom's side of the family. So obviously when I step out, I'm a little bit different. So just kind of my background of just being a young man in this area. It may teach me a lot about. I'm 26 now, and I actually just got a job over in Falls Church. So this is all the new area to me. So they used to live here. They showed me everything about it, and then they just keep me in touch with history. So it's good to have knowledge. So that's why I'm here.

Reverend Jason Whitley [00:09:05] So where'd you grow up? Where'd you grow up?

Corey [00:09:07] I grew up at Sterling.

Michael Johnson [00:09:11] Ask your cousin about that. I'm Michael John I work for the city. I'm a community outreach specialist, but I'm also a student at Copper State University and uh next year after I finish these internships up. I'll be graduating because I want to do public history after I finish my tenure there. You see, I'm born and raised here. I'm sorry. I just live a couple of blocks over before we move. And I just recently won a Preservation of Virginia Fellowship scholarship for \$10,000. They're all doing research on a cemetery, African-American cemetery called Douglass Cemetery. Where I have a lot of my ancestors buried.

Helena [00:09:50] Where's that?

Michael Johnson [00:09:51] It's about, eight blocks over from here. Okay. You know where the Lee Center is, you're going on Route One you'll see Wilkes Street. You make a right on Wilkes. We go straight to the end. Soon as you pass these condos, there's red brick building. On your right is Douglass cemetery. Okay. And that cemetery goes way back in time. I mean, there was slaves. It's freedom, you know. So my great grandfathers there.

Helena [00:10:19] We we found by accident. Frederick Douglass's, one of the homes he lived in.

Michael Johnson [00:10:24] In Anacostia DC?

Helena [00:10:25] No.

Michael Johnson [00:10:29] Eastern shore oh eastern shore. You talking about St. Michael's.

Helena [00:10:31] Near there.

Michael Johnson [00:10:32] Yeah, yeah, where he grew up at. He was right, yeah. Yes. St. Michael's.

Helena [00:10:36] Yeah. And they're, they've they're putting more money into really making it over.

Michael Johnson [00:10:40] If you can stomach going across that Bay bridge to get there.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:44] Not a problem.

Michael Johnson [00:10:44] But yeah. But.

Helena [00:10:47] Yeah, maybe with blinders.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:10:48] All right. So really quick, just say take a time. Yeah, but we're gonna do introductions. So I've already introduced myself. Do you want to do so? If you can go around, say your name and say your affiliation. So which.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:10:59] Pastor Lou. Um. Original Washingtonian. But, I've been a pastor within the city of Alexandria for 23 years.

Merrick [00:11:07] Which church?

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:11:09] It's called My Father's House Christian church. We're on the west side of Alexandria, on Eisenhower.

Reverend Jason Whitley [00:11:16] My name is Reverend Jason Whitley. I am the associate to the pastor at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where our pastor is the Reverend Doctor Albert P. Jackson.

Reverend Anthony Oliver [00:11:30] I'm Anthony, Anthony Oliver, Pastor Oliver, Reverend Oliver Brother Oliver. I'm like a third generation preacher. My great grandfather was pastor, pastor of seven churches in the Carolinas. The church that I pastor is Mount Jezreel Baptist church, it's a

few blocks away from here. They are. They've been in the community 143 years. I'm the pastor of the church that my parent's parents went to. That's how my parents met. I've been in that church all my life, I'm 53. I got my master's degree, and I'm working on my doctoral degree.

Michael Johnson [00:12:12] And I really just went.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:12:14] Now you do it again, that's fine.

Michael Johnson [00:12:16] I'm Mike Johnson. Born and raised here in the city of Alexandria. My family goes back to 1790, in the state of Virginia. I grew up a couple blocks over. I no longer live in the city, but I still work here. I got married, and she took me to Maryland. I don't know why but ended up in Maryland. But glad to have ya'll.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:12:39] Great, I just want to add because we're recording. Today is Tuesday, June 18th, 2024, and we're at the Durant Center in Alexandria, Virginia. So let's just start with maybe what are some of your earliest memories? About you know of spirituality, and or religion. What are some of your first, earliest memories that you can think of?

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:13:04] Want me to start?

Francesco De Salvatore [00:13:05] Yeah, we start with you.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:13:07] I don't know.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:13:11] Any memories of your parents? Memories of?

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:13:14] My earliest memory of spirituality is totally negative. Was totally negative. Didn't grow up in that environment, never knew my father. So the structure was all, already challenging. Turned me loose when I was 12. She she did manage to get us to go to church every now and again on Easter. You know. And I remember when I was 12, my mother made a very profound statement. She said, hey, if you go to church, you get baptized. You'll be a full grown man. You know I went to church right. Next Sunday I went straight to church and I sat in the service and didn't listen to nothing they was saying. When I sat down and waited for the preacher to say, who wants to get baptized? Well, first of all, I raised my hand, jumped up, ran down there. That that day out in the service I got baptized, came out of church and went back home. Went to my mom and said, "hey, I'm a full grown man. And guess what? First decision as full grown man. She said what boy? I said I'm never going to church again? That was my first experience. So I never went back. So from 12 to 27 I never stepped foot in a church. So that's my earliest experience. So what I saw of the church didn't appeal to me. They never came out of those buildings to come where I was and give me. I could have died in my sins. But there was nothing appealing about the church, even in men that i saw the image that they had. We use, you know, in an environment that I grew up that you couldn't survive the week. Even given off the image of them. So it just didn't appeal to me, you know. So I would say my first experience with spirituality was just was just negative. I can keep going if you want me to. This just. My wife was the one who introduced me to, to the church. And to this day, I still say it was a trick because when I first saw her you know I was in darkness when I first saw her I was in darkness. Still wasn't going to church or anything like that. And I saw what I liked. I was attracted to her. So my whole mindset was screwed up, you know, because I was

thinking one thing and she was living another way, you know, just trying to be clean. But I remember walking up to her. Good morning DC style. You know, my best rap game, all that kind of stuff. She threw a line on me that I had never heard before. She said, "Are you saved?" I looked at her and was like I don't know what that means, but I can fake it. You know that's what I said to her. Said I would fake it. And she said I can't. I can't date you. I can't do nothing with you because you ain't saved. So I got mad at him. Had a couple of choice words and I don't talk like that anymore. Walked away from her. Because we worked in the same place I watched her every day. Every single day I'm watching her because I knew she was gonna change. So one Friday I walked up to her and I said, "hey, you still going to Bible study?" Which I couldn't grasp that concept going to Bible study on Friday night. I had a whole bunch of other stuff going on on Friday night. And I said, can you come by my place and pick me up and we'll go to Bible study? This totally shocked her because I am not ever there. It was no doubt, no conversation, I was mad. You know how could you not want me? You know what? And it shocked her, and she actually I was shocked she came. She came out to my house knocked on the door. You know, I answered the door and I had to get my hand and hiding it in my back pocket. Just finished smoking a big old blunt. Snorted some cocaine. My mindset was I'm going to church. Imma trip off, why you looking at me like that man. I'm, I'm being honest my wife will tell you that man. Now listen, I was high as a kite, my mindset was I'm going to church and trip off the church for me. That was my mindset. And so I got in the car and we rode towards Bible study and she didn't say nothing to me and I didn't say nothing to her, which is fine, because I was sipping on my Hienekens, finished up one toss it out the window pull the other one out my back pocket. By the time I got to the front door, man, I was blessed. And went in the house, it was in a house, went down to the basement, and I just left, disappeared, gone. And it had been probably four or five years man since I could see that straight, you know? And I was sitting there, man, I mean I was I had no buzz, nothing. But I just left. And that night I didn't understand nothing they were saying. I was seeing them hugging on each other like church folk do. I thought they was fake. I'm like, ain't that much love in the world. You know. And I'm saying there. I ain't say nothing. Nobody said anything to me. You know, at the end of Bible study. There's one young lady to this day I cherish that young lady man, and she was the only one who was not afraid of me. The only one. She was the smallest one in the house. She came up to me and she said, do you want to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Only thing came out my mouth was yes. That night I gave my life to Jesus Christ and I haven't been high since. I haven't chased another woman since then. I had a, Apostle Paul experience if you call it that. You know, and I don't think, was when we went to Bible study every Friday night. And I knew she was going. That night, I got saved. I heard a voice say it because I ain't know who the voice was. And I remember when I joined this first church, the church she was at, and I'm told the pastor, I said, "Imma marry her." He laughed at me. He say that's you. She got too much quality for you. He knew I was.

Michael Johnson [00:19:19] Still in the world.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:19:20] Yeah. He knew that I'm still, still on it, you know. But he didn't know that I actually had a true conversion, that night. That's who I've been with for 38 years, you know. And there's so many more details that I'm leaving out. But from 12 to 27, I didn't have a spiritual gift. They was just told me that no person can possibly be a God in an environment that I'm living in. Stuff like that too. I saw her and I didn't believe she was really because I didn't see a positive image going from college and stuff. That's a whole different story, but she was different. And I decided to follow her to church had been in love with God ever since then. She showed me something different.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:20:12] And I say I got tricked because you know dating a light skin woman. You know, I know.

Michael Johnson [00:20:18] And she look like Angela Davis back then, big fro.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:20:22] Yeah. I can't even believe I'm attracted to her. Yeah. So I knew it had to be you. It had to be God. I was going to church, I was committed, I was faithful. But I couldn't find Genesis 1:1 if it could have saved my life. Even if I used the table of contents, I could find Genesis 1:1. That's how much knowledge I had of the bible. Absolutely nothing. And pastor was not on my bucket list. Hope I didn't stun ya'll too bad

Francesco De Salvatore [00:20:53] It's a good start. It's a good start.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:20:55] It's a true story I mean. I look back at this part for me as I, I was raised in Washington, DC. And see, growing up in Washington, WASHINGTON, D.C. you didn't come over to Virginia. It was just something in the atmosphere something said to us growing up in our childhood and our youth. You don't go over to Virginia because of the racism that existed in Virginia. If you do happen to find yourself over there, don't stay long and don't go past Crystal City. If you go past Crystal city you take your own life in your hands. So this how we grew up But because of my mindset at that time, of course I still came over to Alexandria you know. It had some interesting interactions and stuff like that. And then all of a sudden, a couple of years later, fast forward, God called me to set up a church in Alexandria. I just couldn't believe what I was hearing in my spirit. Because I was totally opposed to Alexandria, as a matter of fact my wife and I, we get married, we actually lived in Alexandria and she she ain't wanna leave Virginia. So, I submitted myself to her desires. I came over here and lived in Alexandria as long as I could. That lasted three and a half years, and I finally talked her out of it. Let's go back across the bridge. It's just. I couldn't deal with it.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:22:31] Well what about you? What's your earliest memory?

Reverend Jason Whitley [00:22:36] (inaudible) My earliest memory of, spirituality honestly, I'd say on a different scale. I was chosen for it a church baby so to speak. My family has, so, not to give a big history lesson, but um the Baptist faith was founded in 1758 in Mecklenburg County, Virginia. My family is from Mecklenburg County, Virginia and we go back and trace our history, that's where we trace our history to. So for me, we've been in this faith since the very beginning. So it was it was nothing for me to kind of be apart. My great grandfather was a pastor, my uncles were pastors. And honestly, where I'm at now is I finally feel like spiritually, I'm starting to fulfill the legacy that my family has set up for me because I knew what I was supposed to do, but, from a child when you get there and you see all these people you know doing this, things like that, you see it, you understand it to an extent and you're taking it all in. But you still trying to find out whether or not it's real, you know what I'm saying? If it's real for you. And there were a lot of days where, I think. I was in church one day, you know, because my mom had me in church every Sunday, no matter what, all of Sunday, all day, you know, choir rehearsal. But when I wasn't in church, I was in the projects. I was in Charles Houston, I was at the Boys Club, I was anywhere that I could be that wasn't around church. Just so that I can see what, I don't know what to say, like, but the other side of life was. And, you know I found myself kind of teetering that line for a long time. Going to different, you

know, groups being apart of different groups and trying to be the sort of the ideal look. But knowing, you know, underneath there's still some things that, you want, you want to do and, you know, kind of things in you. I'll give you an example. I know all my life God has always been with me. I grew up about three blocks from here, on the 500 block of Bank [Franklin] Street. My mother worked on the west side. At the Hermitage, right on Boulevard avenue. I was four years old and I decided that I wanted to see my mother. And so I decided that I had transportation. I got on my big wheel and I proceeded to drive my big wheel.

Pastor Lou Whiting [00:26:02] Big wheel awesome.

Reverend Jason Whitley [00:26:06] I got on my big wheel and I drove my big wheel all the way up. And when I, when I got help to get there. No lie, I was in front of Alexandria Baptist church, First Baptist Church of Alexandria, right next to T.C. Williams. So I drove my big wheel from here all the way up there because I was headed to go see my mother. Now, the funny thing is, I was headed in the right direction. I don't know how I was headed in the right direction. I don't know what what guided me in the right direction. That's why I say I know God was with me. Because the man who did finally help me pick me up, you know, put my big wheel in his trunk and drove me and I told him where I going drove me to my mom's job and my moms, you know, somebody told my moms, she said, "hey, you know, your son's outside." My Moms going I haven't like my son's outside? You know, I'm four my brother's ten. Well, actually, not at the time. So, which son is big enough to come to see her at her job? You know, so when she said my son's outside, you know something. And when she sees its me and she sees the guy pulling my big wheel out, that was the end of my big wheel, first of all. I never had another big wheel after that. But you know, that just that just, you know, kind of I when I think of stories like that, I can, I can remember, you know, before this new, you know, nice, you know, new Alexandria Jefferson Houston school was here. It was a one level school, okay and kind of different corridors. And if you look on the back there was where the fence was I decided at eight that I wanted to see what the top of the school looked like. So I use the fence and I climb on top of the school one day. I was at the school that weekend or something, because I live right around the corner. It was nothing for us to play, you know, in the pool here. You know, I grew up, I learned to swim here. And so I remember getting suspended. I don't know how they found out that I was over the top of school, but, you know, Miss Carolyn Lewis, who was a member of my church and also my school principal. So, I had kind of a tricky childhood in the sense that the church that I grew up was all, they were a lot of, educators and, you know, working class. So, you know, a lot of them were principals and teachers and, you know, educators and things like that. So I didn't really get a chance to do a whole lot, because every time I did, because of the image that I was presenting, someone would always find out and it would get back to my mother, as you probably know, some other cases. And so I decided, you know, about 15, I used to spend a lot of my time, starting to kind of sort of challenge my faith understanding kind of feeling, you know, what am I supposed to do? You know, where am I supposed to be? You know, and, you know, you hear people who are telling you, you know, but you got this calling in your life, you gonna do this. You need to do that, you know, and in some ways, you see some things because, you know, you know, based off some of the things that I've already been through, that it was only God that could have got me through those things. And so. You know that he's there. And I remember, you know, getting on my bike and I would ride from my house I would ride all the way to the 14th Street Bridge, through the parkway. But this be late at night, I wait till everybody was asleep, I get on my bike and I sneak out the house and start riding. About 12, 1:00 at night through the projects and all the way to the to, to the Gdub parkway down, and, kind of just sneak back in, you know, when I when I was

done. In those times, I would actually spend time with God and kind of just listen and talk to him and just kind of, feel his presence for me. And what I recognize is for me when I was in his presence, I felt good. I was at peace, I was calm, there was no, you know, there was no chaos. There was no, you know. When I was in church, I felt the same way. But when I was at home, it always felt like something was missing. It always felt like I was searching for something, you know, there was times when I would, you know, want to, you know, sit there and try to confide in my mom and talk to my mom. And I don't know if she understood what I was even saying, you know, sometimes it seemed like it was just, you know, and so, I'm like, she didn't get it. So talking to her, you know, I can't talk to her. My dad's not around, you know. He's around now, but back then, he was scarce. And he didn't have, you know, to my knowledge, his spiritual relationship. So I didn't have, you know, the people to necessarily guide me because even though I can see what other family members are, they're distant, you know, they're not they're not here, they're not living this life, you know. And so I finally I get to a point where, my conversion happened for me when I went to Eagle Irie. It was a youth retreat that, the church sent us to every year. And during that retreat, I was almost reintroduced to God from a different way. I was introduced to, sort of his power and his protection and his calling to serve. I knew at that moment I was supposed to serve, but it didn't start that way. When I got there, I remember talking to, was funny, because he's now my dean, and that's how I'd say God has a funny way of orchestrating life, because at 15 I went to this man and I'm like, you know, I hear all this stuff, and I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to do and what he told me. He looked at me and said, "clearly, I don't know." Which shocked me because I was expecting for him to tell me something, you know, more revelatory, you know what I'm saying. But he said, I don't know. But he said, you know what? He said, I can promise you this, though, if you really want to know, pray about it and by the time you leave this mountain, you'll know. The very next night we were thinking it was funny because at that time, it was with the Baptist General Convention. They were doing a, Nashville, we do a statewide the the the retreat is statewide. So it's all the different youths from different churches in the state they come together. And this year, that particular year was 93, and they had Kirk Franklin there. And so he was our minister of music that I love to sing, you know, so we were all, you know, in praise and worship and praise was high. I mean, it was high, you know, it was so high that we had balloons that were rising to the air. We were trying to, you know, the more we praise, the more we could see the balloons popping. And we saw them pop. We just gotta pray because we want to pop all of them, you know, it was it was that type of experience. And at that moment I knew, so I went up to him and I told him, I said, "You know what? I know. I know exactly what I'm supposed to do." And he looked at me and said, "don't tell me, tell them." And so he handed me the mic. And that's when I, you know, proclaim to all these youth, that God had called me to preach. And from that moment on, I've been trying to be what God has called me to be. And what I've recognized in life is that no matter how committed you are God, there's always going to be some ups. There's always going to be some balance, there's always going to be some challenges and God never called anybody who was perfect. And so if you expect to be perfectly called, then you've already missed your calling. God uses imperfect people to accomplish a perfect goal. And once we understand that, once we understand that he uses us in our brokenness, and sometimes he has to be able to call out a person who has never had a relationship with God. Sometimes he has to have to go to a person who has known about God, but has only been trying to figure it out for himself the whole time. But no matter what way God comes in, there come that light bulb where you know. And once you know, there's nothing that anybody can ever tell you, there's nothing that anybody can ever deter you. Because no matter how life goes, you always feel compelled to feel miserable when you're not doing the will and the call of God that you know you're supposed to be doing. That's about it.

Francesco De Salvatore [00:35:56] Thank you.

Reverend Anthony Oliver [00:35:58] Wow. Okay. Okay.

Michael Johnson [00:36:01] You don't wanna follow that huh.

Reverend Anthony Oliver [00:36:03] I know. Well, my experience is totally different. My first vision, spiritual acknowledging God was actually in the church. I can still see it to this day in Mount Jezreel. Reverend Houston was the pastor. My grandfather was a deacon, and he opened up the doors of the church, and I walk down the aisle seven years old. I'll walk down that aisle around me, Houston, and everybody, and I can still see, like, a vision. Everybody was like, "oh, hello, oh." You know, they see a young kid, "oh", and I can hear. And Reverend Houston asked me, he said, "Why are you here?" I said, "because I want to get baptized." He said, "Why do you want to get baptized?" Because, God is good. And that was it. I got baptized. And from that point on, memories of family getting together to go to church for Easter. Memories of family getting together for a birthday. Grandfather there doing the prayer, blessing the food, bringing all the the grandkids to the house because we going to church on Sunday, so we would all go to Granddaddy's house, grandma's house, for the weekend and we played Saturday. Everybody got a bath Saturday night. All your clothes was laid out ironed all the girls was getting their hair done in the kitchen. Waking up that Sunday morning, granddaddy cooking breakfast making, we call them pan pancakes. You make a pancake the size of a pan, and every child will get a pan pancake. And we all sit there and eat. We couldn't wait to go to church. We were excited about church. We all got money to give to the offering. We, we always dressed. We look good. Those were like memories, childhood memories, of my faith. That which drew me to Christ was the fellowship of family. It wasn't God. It wasn't church. It was that that love of being together with your family. To go in the direction that these two men went in is to say, growing up, I learned later, when I became a minister, when and when God, as we say, call called you, called you out of that dark place. Being a preacher, pastor now, my mother would come stay with me and I'll be, like, working on my sermons. And I'd be like, "mom, you know, I'm worried", you know, she sees me wrestling. She says, "son, don't worry about it. You know, you've known the Lord all your life." I'm like, what do you mean? She say, "when you was a kid, you used to take your homework and put it under your pillow and pray. I used to see you. I would ask you, what are you doing? You say, oh, God, going, give me the answers." And these were stories now that I'm learning now in my 50s, that I was, that my mom just started resurfacing because she sees me in a role as a pastor, just to refreshen my memory. But I can recall being in school, writing poetry and drawing because there's three of us. I'm the middle child, so I always found myself by myself. And so I would write poems and draw and I would submit my stuff to school. I was winning poetry contests, but in my poems I was writing about God. I would do arts and drawing and pottery and sculpture and I would win, win prizes, you know, awarded by the school. And I have a, a binder like this thick of all these certificates and accomplishments. But the one thing that I knew that I wasn't apologetic about was I knew that God was with me. And when being a nerd, I was called a nerd because I sat in front of the class, always carry all my bags with me. I wore glasses, I kept my pins in my shirt pocket. I was literally Urkel, you know, sitting in front of the class. And I enjoy class. I enjoy getting good grades, I enjoy education, and when kids would pick on me, I would say, you know, God is on my side. I just knew God was on my side. But then there's another one, another element. When I was bad, when I was not doing things right growing up. My parents believe in discipline and I recall praying, praying a lot to God because I knew the

wrath of my father was unlike any other. And, so I prayed a lot growing up that I wouldn't get beat or punished. And and that it was a part of my character was a part of who I was. And I ended up becoming a leader, not really trying to be a leader. I was I grew up in Prince William County, Manassas, and I was voted class president. Yeah, I never expected to get voted to win, I tried, but, people really respected me or reverence me. But I didn't really reverence myself that way, because when I wasn't in school, I was doing a lot of things that were not godly. And I was living, getting my parents, blood pressure up because I was doing things that was not pleasing to God, nor to my parents. But as I got became an adult in my 20s, something that, changed my life, as we would say. It got I was going to church and I started having dreams and visions that I could not explain. I would start having out-of-body experiences and I could hear God speaking to me audibly, but I thought I was losing my mind. I thought I was going crazy. I could literally take the Bible, open it up, and it looked like the words were floating off the page and I would be myself, like looking at it, marveling at what I was witnessing. But there was no one there. But it was just God and me. And the turning point was a lady at the job had an accident where her car rolled over her child, and, the child did not make it. And at that time I was struggling with my faith, but God was really working on me. I'm having dreams, I'm having visions, I'm having out-of-body experiences, and I'm at work and I'm trying to get a career going. I'm trying to do better. And this incident happens and everyone says, hey, Anthony, why don't you pray? We want to have prayer. We want you to pray, I'm like all these people in the office. Y'all want me to pray? So again, I was like, okay, I took my Bible and it wasn't my Bible, it was my parents Bible because growing up I would sneak into my parent's living room, was the room you weren't supposed to go in, and I would get my parents Bible and I would go in the house some alone and read the Bible, just literally read it and pray and talk to God. And that was my secret thing. And I would read it and God, and I would take it and hide it and put it back. And this day, when I'm at work and an adult, they asked me to pray because of this incident. I took the Bible. I went up to the top of the building in the conference room. No one was there. And I said, God, you know, I'm struggling. I don't even know if you're real, but I'm struggling. These people want to hear from you, not from me. So please show me what you would have me to read. And when I opened up my hands from prayer like that, it opened up to Revelations 21 where it says, God shall wipe away every tear from their eye, I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former things have passed away. And I remember reading that and the prayer circle, and I felt this power come over me. Everyone was crying, even my son. We were all weeping. And I knew like something changed at that moment. That night we had Bible study. I went to Bible study and I was I couldn't wait for testimony, and I stood up and gave my testimony about what had happened at the office. Pastor Glass, Samuel Glass was the pastor at the time, and after Bible study, I went to give him a hug and literally like, you know, like *The Exorcist*, something came out like some came out like a cry. And he held me and all the deacons circled me and prayed for me. And from that point on, I've been in church like nobody's business. I mean, from everything from serving as an usher, to working in the kitchen, to driving the van, to serving as a state usher for the ICUA, serving as a district president, state president, recording secretary, trustee recording secretary, men's fellowship, men's fellowship recording secretary, the youth minister, then becoming voted by the church to serve as pastor. The history behind that. The church, never in the history of its life, voted for a man to serve as pastor. That man not be married. So I was the first ever non married man to serve as pastor. And also in the history of the church, they never voted to have one of their own to become a pastor. They always go out and get someone and bring someone in. But I was the very first one in the history of the church to from within the church to be brought up. And and I don't know if this is true or not to, but it may be also history when I stood for ordination. You have to go through the 12 articles of faith, and each article of faith is based on, you know, book in the Bible, like,

communion, the true God, the fallen man. I went through all the articles of faith, by myself. Typically when you go to ordination, there's other Ministers that are there questioning. So they if they question you, you don't know the answer, they'll go to the next minister to keep the ordination going through. I was by myself. It was just the Lord and me. And we went through all 50, 150 questions. And it got to the point where some of the members were like, stop, it's this is too much. But my what my catechism doctor John Franklin said, look, I had to take you through all those questions so there would be no doubt in anyone's mind that God has called you. I see it. They need to know it. And so he took me through it shortly after that. The pastor who, Doctor Richard E. Woods, put in his resignation to resign, and the church voted to have me become pastor. And I've been pastoring since then. It's been 15 years now. I later found out that my grandfather was in ministry. My dad had brothers I never knew about, was a bishop in Maryland, and they took us to North Carolina. And when I got to North Carolina to meet my father's side of the family, there was over 150 Ministers in the family tree. We had they invited me to come back. After getting there, they said, hey, I heard you, Minister want you to do the prayer over the food. So I did the prayer. They were like, next year we want you to come back and preach. And I've just been serving the Lord ever since. I'm not. I don't believe that any of us, as you put it, perfect. Because of the fall of man, but God, he has a way of, through our mistakes, reminding us that there's no greater love than his love. And I think that's the struggle with many of us, even myself, in ministry, trying to teach others how to use their gift. Is that is not your gift. He's just using you to use your gift. Like you what you're doing right now, it's a gift. And it's a legacy that he's using you to bless others with because when you're gone, they're going to look back and see he might not have known it but God was using him too. Yeah, yeah. And that's the joy of it is having dreams and visions. The struggles that I went through, man, I can see, I can see people's spirit. There's things I can see now then if I wasn't blind before, I wouldn't be able to see. There's a sort of sensitivity that God has that should be constant. But because of our own pride, it gets pushed down. But when someone comes in as meek, the unchosen one, the one that's not supposed to be there, but is there. That's the one he'll use, because that person is sensitive enough to know that it ain't even about all of the people in here it's about God. And so that's that's my my testimony is that and there's other stuff that I've really skipped over, but I truly know God is real and he speaks. And it's not like people think, there's things, and I'll say this, this is how I knew I had a gift. I'll be preaching at a funeral. And I started having interbody and a Out-of-body experience, and I start feeling pains and things. I started seeing things, and I kept like, quenching because the Bible says it's not the Holy Spirit. I kept quenching it, but eventually I started getting bolder. And I remember saying, someone on this side of the room, you have a pain right here on the left side, it's right here, you know, please, if it's you just just God in the midst of eulogizing someone, that's how the heavy it was. And I stopped the sermon and said, look, this is going on right now, and God is telling me to talk to somebody. Nobody move. At the end of the service, the, Mr. Green came and got me, funeral director, came and got me and said, "hey, did you talk to the man who you was talking about? You said he had the pain in the back." It's like, no, no one came. He said, come here let me go take you, take you to the man that you was talking about. And so there's gifts that are not for us, but and I pray for the man. You know, we were at the graveside and I pray for him and, and and my walk has been like that, like things that shouldn't be happening happen. But I thank God for it because he just uses us to help that person who's really struggling in their faith. So.

Michael Johnson [00:51:54] If for me, because I'm a member of the church that Pastor Oliver, pastor at, or minister at, I grew up in a church, my mother was like, yeah, she wasn't a minister, but she thought she was a minister because every day she would before she went to work, she would

make sure we had dinner. She would work at night. So she would make sure the dinner was prepared. But every day, every morning that I was going to school, she would be up after working and getting off at 12:30, midnight, having something for us to eat in the morning, breakfast or whatever, because she was a good cook and a good baker and had no recipes written down, as you can attest. What you do tell her what you wanted, she made it, perfect. I never seen a person like that outside of her to this day, but she introduced all of us to her rock because she grew up in a church in a little small town called Bondsville, Georgia. The thing was, as we was growing up, we lived in a house on Queen Street, and we had one bedroom, one bed for five boys, a cart in the corner for my sister and my mother and father always slept in the kitchen. My father to me, as I look back now, and before he passed, I don't think he was ready to be a father because he drank a lot. He cursed a lot. He was very abusive, mentally and physically, especially to me because he said I looked just like him. And I couldn't, I couldn't really I don't know how to relate to that. I thought that a man would want his son to be just like him because I thought the world of him. But my brothers and them that would do things and I would get whoopings. And one story, and my mother, I know she shared some of her at members of the church was that, our youngest brother stole \$20 out of her purse. He bought everybody ice cream in the neighborhood but me. But when I got home, they say I don't, I'm the one that took the money without even, like, asking who took it. Michael took it. So I said well they can't take this whooping that my father put on them. So I took the whoopings, I took all the beatings for all my brothers, older or younger, because I didn't want them to go through it. But what I saw my father doing was even though he wasn't equipped to raise six kids, he worked two job, my mother worked two job and she kept and stayed in church, and in the summertime I went to Bible study. I went to a night church or whatever they was having around Mount Jezreel. I can't remember just all I know the whole summer, I hated for the summer to come because I was in church. Me and my siblings, we was in church. Yeah, I mean, we was in church on the regular, so it took me away from the faith and I got caught up in the street. And, I can say it now because God do work miracles. And for me to be sitting here is a miracle because I was a drug user. I added really, I was a drug dealer. I wanted to be a pimp because pimp had the money and the girls. So that's what I looked at, right? And my mother kept saying, you know, God, I just hate this about my mother, though, because she would say, if you keep doing what you're doing, God's going to put you in a situation where you might not be able to get out of it. And I hung with this guy and broke into this building. He ran because I didn't know how to get out of the building, so I got caught. My worst nightmare was I had to explain this to my mother and father. And my mother would just beat us. I mean, that's the discipline part. Don't do this because her her name or image. She was a very religious woman, you know, and all of my other brothers then followed that strict line. I didn't I was the one that was going to jump across here. He said, Michael, I remember this very vaguely, everytime I look at a electrical socket and I stick that coat hanger in that plug, and as soon as she turned her back, I took the coat hanger stuck it right in the plug and got the beJesus knocked out with, right? My father, had joined Church, as I remember, and because of this one situation, my mother came home from work. My father had been drinking, and he accused my mother of being out with another man or something. And it was like 12:30 at night, we like, hey, dad, she just got off work. So my mother ran in our room, and me and my brothers, and I have 5 brothers and one sister, we were like, we going to stop them jumping on mom? We will stand together, you know, and we're going to get on him when he come up in room. My mother was still in tears because she had been working hard. My father walked in the room. I'm the first one to jump up, and I look around my brothers they're playing like they sleep. So I'm like, so I was already up, so I was like, I love you, but if you put your hand on my mother again, Imma kill you. I told him just like you at about 14, 15 years old, and he looked at me and say, woman, you just got this crazy boy. Ain't the word we used

but he called me a crazy N, all stirred up. But he walked out of the room and it took his transition to become a member of the church for me to even look at God in that way. Like if God can change him, he can change anybody. During my addiction I got real sick and instead of my father calling for an ambulance right up front. I had very high temperature, about 103. Everything was fuzzy. He put me in the car and he was going to attempt to take me to the hospital. And as soon as we got in the car, we didn't even go two doors down, I vomited, and it went back down and I was choking off of it and I looked over my dad, I never forget his face because he started crying. He didn't really know what to do. He jumped out the car, left the car door open, run back to the house to try to call an ambulance. Well, when he jumped down, something told me get up and get out that car. And when I got up, I got up and I was trying to go into full stride and I tripped. My chest hit the ground and it came up. And then we waited for the ambulance to come. And, you know, they took me to the hospital, I had fever. I mean, they did everything, you know, to revive me. But, I remember the doctor saying, "you know, don't go out the house for about 15 days." And this was on a Friday. No, no, this was on a Monday. That Sunday, my dad, mom went to church in Mount Jezeert. I came walking through the door, first thing they said was the doctor told you stay in the House 15 days. I say, something told me, come here. And when the preacher said, who want to join church? Now my, my family members already been baptized. I had never been because I was the devil as they call it, the red devil. That what they used to call me the red devil. I walked down that aisle, and I still didn't believe because I said, just like you, look, when I get baptized, if they baptize me in the water, because you know, my mother's going the water going to boil when you get it, you know, so I'm like, I don't even know if i want to get baptized. So I think it was about a month or so later when they had baptism, I went there and, I got baptized and I started reflecting back on what I had done. When our daddy, who I hurt the most, was my parents, their name, my brothers and sisters, you know, they were like, you got to do something with your life better than this. And I just wasn't into that. I was into a whole different world. But after I came through that transition and praying, I still pray to this day, I pray as soon as I get up. Yes, I pray. I pray when I'm in shower. I pray to God to continue to give me the strength to help others because it ain't about me. It's about them, like you say you. He he took, he took somebody that wasn't supposed to be here and made him stay here to use me. And I always tell people you can't take nothing with you when you leave this earth, but I want to leave a footprint. They say he did try to help somebody else because God really helped me. As I made my transition, I started off coaching basketball And then these guys came to get me. Because they said we think you'll be the perfect guy to be the coordinator for this new program we started and that was the Untouchables. So I had Jason and Arlim in there. You know, he changed his story. I had to come to his house after I was making my transition, but at the same time, I was still getting high. I was still getting high. And then it was like I had been baptized. And I said, you know, man, you a sinner you ain't doing right. You ain't living right. Nothing that I touch the next three years Impacted anybody life but mine in a very negative way. But my mother always said, Michael, you need to get back in church. Even to the day when she passed, you need to go back to church. You need to pray more. You need to do this. She said because God got something for you to do. And I kept saying, mom, you just, you know, you read your Bible all the time. She could sing to. She could really sing back in the younger days and we would just listen to her sing hymns. She said, Michael, you know, you need to really pray and ask God to forgive you for the stuff you're doing out here and say, God don't care about me. Well, he showed me in another way because my high school girlfriend got pregnant and I was in college, and my dad, they aint' have no cell phones and all that back then. You get one call home a month. So I made that call home. The girl and the mother had already came told my dad and them that she was pregnant. So this conversation me and my father had, he said, you now about to be a father. I said, yeah. He said well you gotta get a job. I

said well dad I'm doing good in school. I'm gonna get a college degree. I'm the first one. He said, no, you need to get a job. Not knowing by him saying that to me, and then he said, because we rented your room out. So I was all messed up in the head cause I didn't have no room to myself, right. So I said he just don't want me, he don't love me anyways. So about a week later, I joined the Marine Corps. They didn't know where I was at, until you get that letter from the Marine Corps saying, hey, your son has arrived safely at Parris Island, and my father say this d fool done joined the Marines. Right? And when I got home out of bootcamp, I never forget him saying, why you join the Marines? I said, because you told me you rented the room out. I said, then it dawned on me after I had signed the dotted line that there's no way you could rent the room out because you still got four other brothers underneath staying in that room. Yeah. Hey, you know, I couldn't put it together. So I started working with kids in the city and my neighborhood because I didn't see no real good image of me in the neighborhood. I saw a guys that was hustling. I saw guys with a lot of money, a lot of women, fancy car. That was I, I was attracted to, how you get there was another story. And they told me, if this is what you want, it's the repercussions real bad when you come behind this. so I started working, you know, working with the youth. And I tell people this all the time, and I don't share my substance abuse story with people because I don't want the next person to think because he made it, I can make it. Because that's not true. It's not true. I've lost a lot of friends that I went to school with over drugs. I mean hard drugs. I have no quarrel with marijuana or some other but those hard drugs, heroin, cocaine. I'm like, whoa, whoa, it's taking too many people away. But he put me on a path where, not too many people can say that they met the president of the United States. They made the first black governor. Amen. They met General Colin Powell, it was on the Oprah Winfrey Show. I also started receiving accolades for the work. I never shared it with people. The reason why I do the work I do in the community, because I feel around God, because he brought me through because I was in a real bad place, a real bad storm, and him bringing me out, I say, this the least I can do is serve you and serve your people. I say that in my prayers every day to continue to allow me to serve others. I'm very humbled by where you've taken me from, but I know that I'm the chosen one, that he chose that could deliver his message. And, again, you can take all the accolades away and then I, Pastor Lou here tell you about the project we're doing with Douglass cemetery. I had no clue. No clue. My mother said, you got people buried over there. And I kept saying, mama my people ain't buried at that cemetery. And six months after my mother died, I went to that cemetery, and started finding my family members. And then while I'm sitting there crying in a sense, and I don't know if you caught this Pastor Lou when it was raining, first time we ever went out to Douglass as a group, it was pouring down rain. I went to sit in the gazebo because I was thanking God for getting me to this point that I was going to be used to not only help my family find their history, but help other families find their history. And I said, he's using me each and every day. So people be trying to give me awards and I don't want to go. I don't want to go. And this family member said, no, you gotta go, you can't not show up. And I'm like, well, I don't want to go get an award because I feel so guilty about my past and the path they was on. In how they did everything my parents asked, but yet here I am, Michael. I got the answer to everything. I can tell you why it's raining so hard. And my mother always told me, you know you're so smart, you dumb. I never forget those saying. But without her praying for me, without her singing. And I know it by heart, the rough side of the mountain. Every time I get into a church, especially mount Jezeert, I see my mother sitting in front of that seat. And I was just there a couple of months ago when they had a ceremony move forward. But I saw my mother sitting in the front seat and I'm like, wow, you know, but God rest her soul was that, he's not finished with me. I know I got a lot of work to do still. I'm not as hot tempered as I used to be. I'm still going. And one thing my mother did allow me to do, She didn't allow the other kids. If I had a strong argument on something, she let me roll with it. She

would back me because I got suspended from school because I got three days for being tardy going to class. So they say you got to come back with your mother in order to get back in the classroom. That was at the old Parker -Gray on Madison street. I brought my mother because my mother is about the complexion of Pastor Hughes.

Pastor Lou Whiting [01:08:52] Oh, yeah.

Michael Johnson [01:08:52] They said that wasn't my mother. And she was livid. And like, I was telling them earlier, she couldn't curse. She would mess the English language up trying to curse. But I know what she was trying to say. But she took us and told me that if I don't do anything else in life, I better repay God for what he's done for me. That's what bring me where I'm at today. That's why I like people. I like to socialize. I like to learn from people. And on Saturday, we did this Juneteenth event. It was two ladies there and they're friends of mine, but they are members of the Daughters of the Confederate. And people say, how could you be friends with them? I said, hey, God put me here to meet them.

Reverend Jason Whitley [01:09:43] That's right.

Michael Johnson [01:09:44] I'm good. They have their theory, I have mine. But we can still come together and work together to accomplish the goals that we want. To this day, I go to different churches in a. When Jason was younger, we used to make them go to a different church every month. He was intouchable, every month, each and every month we went to a different church and we started off at Mount Jezeert. We bring the whole group. Looking back for me, I don't really. I'm not a pastor, so I don't really preach religion. I don't try to. All I know is that if God can take a person like me and put me in the places I've been and he always put me there in a humble state to say, it's not about you Mike, it's about them. You are the bridge to bring them over. And I'm I'm sitting here with what would have been what five or six pastors and back in the day, they used to laugh because I would have said, you know, I can't read scripture. I have certain verses in the Bible that I read because those are the ones that, I think attract my attention the most. And I've been invited to churches all the way around. But I keep telling them, you know, I can go to anybody's church, but my church is Mount Jezeert. That's all I ever knew. That's all I ever know as far as and I was sharing this earlier about a pastor they had named Reverend Usely. He would get off work because most of the pastors back then had two job, they worked their regular job and then they came in to pastor do whatever they did at the church. He would come down with a briefcase, and we'd be playing catch football, he would set it down, take his suit jacket off and play with us as long as we stayed out there and that burnt that burnt a memory in my mind, like this how I see pastors, I know that these pastors are engaged in the church. I wish more I mean, not only the church but the community, I wish more of our pastors were really engaging in the church, and I'm not going to call him by name, but I had one pastor tell me that they was giving out spaghetti lunch and a movie. He told me, bring a couple of van loads of kids down here and they get free lunch and watch a movie throughout the summer. And I took a group of kids down there one time, and this is a very prominent church. And I was right. And then I said, my mother told me, God come to the people. If the people don't come to God, why ain't you coming in the neighborhoods that need this service on a regular basis? No, no, no, they got to come here. Me and that guy fell out to the point where I told him he felt as I was being disrespectful, and I said one thing I know for a fact, God took you from somewhere else and put you in this seat. So I'm going to treat you just like somebody on the street because you don't let a compassion for the people like you say you do, because I've seen other

Ministers come out in the community, engage your community, provide an open space. Pastor Lou, for example, this how fickle this city is, he was feeding the homeless every Friday night like Charles used to. You know what the city told him? You can't do that. They don't want him doing that. But people was coming. They was eating. Pastor Oliver had some guys, young guys, they might be still out there in the world. They want to have a block party. I said, okay, we'll help them with it, right. And people say why? But that's what you have to do in order to go to the people, because that's what I was taught to do. I was taught to actually go out there, what we call grassroot hand to hand and deal with people, right. That's formulated me to who I am today. But if it wasn't for God having my mother as a vessel to teach me about his, not only his Ten Commandments, but about his, the way he wanted to be worshiped. And who should be worshiping him. And he always said to me, if they don't want to follow you now, they'll follow you later. And that's what I use every day in my life. Is that what I'm doing is unscripted. I never even imagined that I would be doing a research or a project, because I love history, too. But as a black man growing up, when I came through, they called it being white, if you show that you were intellectually smart at anything in the neighborhood I came up. So I used to suppress it. And, my mother used to always say, you got to step away from the guys you hang with because they're not going anywhere and if you can get where you're going, you can always come back and help somebody. That's the premise of my family and my brothers and my siblings. One of them was school teacher, would mentor. One of them was a retired Fairfax county fire department guy that still mentors guys to get into the fire department. My other brother is a boxing coach that has trained 3 or 4 different Olympic Olympic guys that fought in the Olympics and have more now and then my other brother, my oldest brother, who was the toughest of them all, like nails. He wouldn't let anybody in the neighborhood take advantage of those young guys that we would see as being weak. He would always fight for them. So when I look back and I told Francesco this couple of times back when he did some more interview, that each day, if you ask me a question, I'll give you a different answer, because that's how complex life has been. You know that on any given day, it might trigger me to remember something like I never share with anybody outside of my family members how abusive my dad was. And my father, and one thing about him is that when he died that day on my birthday in 1992, I knew that he had converted to being a man of faith. And to this day, that means a lot to me, because my father was a hell raiser as a youth, as an older man, and all the so-called quote unquote gangster guys never bothered him. They all had known and respected him, but he was a hell raiser, and that bottle of liquor is what brought us and brought him to his destination. Because every day after he got off work, he would take a drink or drink beer, drink liquor. And then God gave him, he became a diabetic, so he could slow down on the drink. He would drink once a year, but if he drank once a year, he would be in bed for two three days. So he just gave it up all together. But as if God could take a man like that and turn his life around. I'm a living miracle, but yeah uh thanks for letting me share that, because like I said that's that's a very personal story.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:17:36] Thank you for sharing that. Yeah.

Michael Johnson [01:17:38] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:17:40] Great. Thank you. Now I'm curious maybe each of you can maybe describe the church you either serve at or that you know that you've attended. Can can you describe, like where where it is that you serve its name, but also can you describe, the demographics and.

Pastor Lou Whiting [01:18:06] My church is non-denominational. My congregation, pretty much all of them, like my wife and I, we like, same as our church. We got a lot of millennials, generation Xers, Zs and stuff like that. Demographics counterbalance we have a mixture of Virginians, Washingtonians, Marylands. But even that was interesting and coming over here to Alexandria, because I knew I was coming into an environment that, and I know you guys can identify with this, it was predominantly Baptist. And that in itself was a learning thing for me. My wife kept trying to tell me that. But I knew God called me to Alexandria. it was real strange when I first came over here and playing in the church because all of the churches in Alexandria have a steeple, you know, we aint have no steeple, we just had a storefront, you know, and I remember some of the comments man like that ain't no church, how ya'll gonna be a church blah blah blah all of that kind of stuff, but that's, that's what I brought into the community of believers. I was not traditional. I wasn't exposed to a lot of traditions in church. So therefore what I brought to my congregation and to planning and church and what I mean by that I'm the founder of the church. For 23 years now a pastor, but I never came with a lot of tradition. Not saying that tradition is not good. To me a little bit of tradition is always great. Great to have. So you come to my church like what I'm dressed like today, I've been doing it for years, you know. Never wore suits I don't like robes because I was never brought up in that. And I think that's what attracted a lot of younger people. Because I was the kind of leader that could be touched. You know, a lot of leaders. You know, it's almost like they live this perfect life. You know there's nothing fallible about them. You can't identify with the next generation and all of that. That wasn't me. I never led my church, like that. I'm a people oriented person. I'm interested in the whole person and not just, you know what the church will benefit from you. And my number one desire is to expose Jesus Christ to people. So my bounty gives me his teaching. So I break the scriptures down where he can be easily understood even by children. So that's always been me as a leader. So from that perspective, you know my Church is not traditional, it's not Baptist, it's not Catholic. It's just a place that we love to come together and worship God. And you gonna get the Word of God, it's not going to be from Able. I don't do any gimmicks or play any games. None of that, I just preach the gospel. That's it. In a way where everybody can understand. So I guess the biggest thing about what I just said is my church is non denominational and we're an environmental atmosphere that's predominantly Baptist.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:21:46] Thank you.

Reverend Jason Whitley [01:21:50] I serve at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, which is on 909 Queen street. It's 143 years old, founded in 1881. Our first pastor I believe was Reverend Phil Cook.

Pastor Lou Whiting [01:22:13] You're just right there on the corner right?

Reverend Jason Whitley [01:22:15] Yeah, corner of Queen and Patrick. But, that's the educational building. We have two buildings but its the whole thing. So the thing about the church is, the church has always been, well, obviously for 143 years, we've been a part of the community for a long time. One thing that I found out recently, through some studying, is, Annie B. Rose, her, the Annie B. Rose Building, which is named after her. She was a member of the church, and her father was one of the pastors. Pastor, I think it's Louis Henry Bailey. Why is that significant? Because she was a member. And one of the things that she did was house, trying to make sure that everyone, from a historical standpoint, from an African-American background and so everyone could have fair and equitable housing during that time, find housing, which is the reason why they, you know, named the building after her, what the church is demographically, we're typically right now we're an older

church, older age group. A lot of a lot of seniors, one of the things I believe that is because, is because of the, I'll use the word gentrification of the city itself and how, things have been kind of restructured and revamped. Where during my youth we had, you know, places where we could drive to. You know, you're saying that no one came to get you. Well, we had vans. We used to go to the community, grab kids and bring them to church. Well, those kids are no longer in those areas. So, you know, if we can, you know, go out, grab them, and, you know, get them to feed their parents into the church, then now, you know, we're having to look elsewhere. But part of that also deals with the fact that we're trying to be a community church. And so we have to make sure that we structured ourselves as a community partner within the church, within the community, so that people who are still here. Know that not, not only is it a place of worship, but it's a place where you can go and find fellowship. It's a place that you can go and find meetings. You can go and find resources. You can go and find, you know, just an atmosphere that is conducive to helping you grow, to be a better individual in life as opposed to just, you know, kind of walking. And I don't want to say with no direction. But I always believe, you know, and I say it this way. Socrates said it this way, An unexamined life is not worth living. And in Jeremiah Wright said this, an unexamined faith is not worth having. And so if you can't examine your life and examine your faith, then typically you're spending your time kind of wandering without any sense of direction. And so the church is a place where we're trying to help people provide that direction. That's probably the best way I can, I can put it right now. But that's that's our church.

Reverend Anthony Oliver [01:26:15] Can you repeat your question?

Francesco De Salvatore [01:26:17] Yeah. Can you describe your the church that you serve at?

Reverend Anthony Oliver [01:26:22] Yes. So Mount Jezreel Baptist church historically is a 134 years old. It's a Baptist church. Basically they believe in baptizing. Do not focus on baptizing infants. We like to wait till children reach the age of accountability and baptize. At one point the church before Covid was packed all the time, every Sunday. But because of Covid, many of your members have stopped coming. This is the thing that I want to throw in. When I became pastor, like these gentlemen to serve it, I started recording the services because I was going to school and my homiletics class the teacher said, record your sermons, record yourself, play them back so that you could critique yourself. Become a better student of you gift, you know, you want to practice your mannerisms. Work on those things. And when Covid hit, I had already been recording services, so when Covid hit, it was like, what are we going to do? The church is closed down. I just started recording them from home. Church even grew during Covid because people would watch the videos and be like, hey, I'd like to be a part of that. During Covid, we went through a renovation. We renovated our the building is totally been remodeled. Recessed lighting, I mean, everything you could want. All of them. Beautiful. Open it back up. Not many people started coming again. So we started knocking on doors, trying to diversify our audience, inviting family and friends to come out. My wife's in the military, whatever we could do. Even doing events on the weekends. Like Mike said, trying to block off the street, come out in the community, we have kids day, you know, whatever we could do. But our church is a Baptist church. Fundamentally, we believe in baptizing. We believe in Christian discipleship. We went. If a person walked down the aisle, we would not just say, okay, you join, you're a member. We like to teach them. We like to have classes. We take them through a five week program. So me being in school, going to school, I, I love education like Mike. I like history. So like Pastor Lue, we teach the gospel. We don't preach at people. If you're talking about John 3:16, For God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever

believeth in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. We going to talk about that scripture. We just going to talk about that one. We could talk about just that one. We don't need a whole lot of other ones to talk about that one. And that's what I tried to do, teach my other Ministers, Associate Ministers, the same thing and to stay true to the fundamentals of we're here to save souls. We're Baptist. It's a matter of fact, I was just talking with Pastor Jackson about the summer sizzle program that we're going to start doing, which is a community outreach thing. So it's all about not saying, hey, I'm a Baptist, come join the Baptist church is more like, are you saved? Do you know the Lord? Do you have a relationship with Christ? If not, let's talk about that. Yeah. And that's that's what we tried to do at Mount Jezreel.

Helena [01:29:56] Excuse me. Pardon me, we have to leave.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:30:00] Yeah. No. That's.

Reverend Anthony Oliver [01:30:01] Man. No, the Thomas.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:30:02] Unfortunately, I think we we're also out of time I didn't know they were closing the rec at 8.

Michael Johnson [01:30:07] Yeah they closing. They only stayed open because of the voting. Oh, yeah. And they pack it up.

Helena [01:30:12] Well, we want to. We have another little grandson on the corner that we want to say good night to before he goes to bed. we are honored to be in your presence. This was phenomenal. I think you all need to get together and you can be the host and have a YouTube channel.

Merrick [01:30:30] You've exceeded our expectations for sure. But even more so. Your mothers were the usual, you know.

Merrick [01:30:40] I'm just amazed.

Helena [01:30:41] You don't have to just, you know, for another hour. Just talk to each of you. Is it alright if we get your contact information from Fransesco.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:30:49] Yeah.

Helena [01:30:50] Like a few follow up questions.

Reverend Anthony Oliver [01:30:52] You're welcome to come visit.

Helena [01:30:53] We will. Yeah. Yeah. Seriously we will. You all are amazing. You really are. And, we hope that, god, that you continue to walk in God's steps. Yeah. And, you're you've been given many, many graces. There's no doubt about it. I'm sure there's no doubt. And we I mean it humbly you to be in your presence it's, it's a gift. And why God brought us here? We don't know. But I think.

Michael Johnson [01:31:26] That's how he do, that's how he work, that's how he works.

Corey [01:31:30] Thank you guys.

Helena [01:31:31] Thank you all thank you.

Michael Johnson [01:31:33] It was nice meeting y'all.

Michael Johnson [01:31:36] What you do?

Corey [01:31:37] I work for enterprise at Falls Church.

Michael Johnson [01:31:38] Okay.

Corey [01:31:39] I need to right a problem there, but I want to thank ya'll.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:31:44] Thank you. Okay.

Helena [01:31:46] Oh, yes. Thank you all so much.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:31:47] Thank you. Yeah so unfortunately, I we could definitely spend another hour, but they're going to kick us out.

Michael Johnson [01:31:54] We could do a Part 2. And that's what I was saying. So yes, we could have other Ministers from other churches, and I think that's what we really need to capture the young folks in the city is because if they see that the Ministers are united, the community is going to unite. Because like I said, they got three different congregations here, but we got 6 or 7 different one and we preaching the same or not preaching because I can't preach, but on the same page, that'll make a tremendous impact out in these communities. And again, I don't want to say it in front of them, but I don't mess with Alfred street.

Reverend Jason Whitley [01:32:34] Your life is the most important service you'll ever preach.

Michael Johnson [01:32:36] Yeah.

Francesco De Salvatore [01:32:37] Hey, I'm going to turn the mic off.

Reverend Anthony Oliver [01:32:42] Alfred streets always been different.

Michael Johnson [01:32:43] No, man.