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
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[Johnson, Aaron]

MEMORANDUM

To: Tim West

Fm: Joe Sinsheimer 

Re: Interviews with James Moore/Reverend Aaron Johnson

Dt: November 29, 1998

Enclosed are two items:

An interview I conducted with the Reverend Aaron Johnson, former pastor of the First Christian Church in Greenwood, Mississippi. Reverend Johnson was one of the first church leaders in Greenwood to open up his/her church to the civil rights movement.

Also enclosed is an interview with James Moore, a prominent civil rights activist in Greenwood, Mississippi. Both interviews focus on the development of the Greenwood campaign in 1962-63.

Interview with Rev. Aaron Johnson
Greenwood, Mississippi
July 10, 1985

J. Sinsheimer: (Can you tell me
how you got started in the Movement?)

Rev. Johnson: We were just trying to get a job done. As a matter of fact, to me, we were basically working with voter registration and to make the community aware of the importance of getting registered. See at that time we were taking people down to register. First, you had to take the examination on part of the Mississippi constitution. And the day I registered, there must have been about thirty or forty of us in a line at the courthouse-- sheriff _____ was sheriff at the time-- and went through the line, and it must have taken me two or three minutes to take the exam. And I finished then and I passed and I was registered.

And the same night--I registered in the afternoon-- the same night two FBI agents came by to see if things had gone well. We didn't believe they were FBI agents.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Johnson: So they had to show us their credentials and everything.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember what year that was?

Johnson: I am not real sure. But this must have been, my daughter, she was home I guess around Christmas then. I am not real sure about ther date. Anyway, we talked with them, and after we told them that I had been registered and they had a good laugh about it, then everything was okay. But during that time (Mr.) Burns was arrested for housing Willie Peacock. He ended up in court and his rights to be a citizen were taken away because they charged him with bigamy.

Sinsheimer: With bigamy, right.

Johnson: And this started a church meeting. And during that time Medgar Evers was there. He came up.

Sinsheimer: Over the Burns' incident?

Johnson: Not over the Burns' incident, but he came up during the time of our voter registration drive. And our daughter prompted us to get involved, I guess basically because

the young people were meeting over at the hotel, there on Stone St.

Sinsheimer: What is the name of that hotel?

Johnson: That was _____ Hotel? So I didn't want them meeting there and that is the way that we opened our church, because we didn't want our children meeting up at the hotel. And we started opening up our church?

Sinsheimer: Why didn't you want your children up there?

Johnson: Well, we didn't think it was a pleasant place to meet for young ladies to meet. And to keep down some of the idle conversation we just opened up our church. Well, I was pastor there at the time. So we opened it up.

Sinsheimer: Did you make that decision individually, or did you talk with your deacons? Do you remember?

Johnson: Well, I talked with them. But then total responsibility was on me. So I was self-employed, I was the only one at that time that could take the impact of the pressure. Everyone else said well he did it, can't hold it on me.

Sinsheimer: What were you doing then?

Johnson: I was trimming hair. So I just left it, they left it totally on me so if they were asked about it then it was on me.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Johnson: They didn't have any authority because I made the final decision. But after our church opened, other churches started opening.

Sinsheimer: Did you talk to other ministers about it? Or was it ...?

Johnson: After the fact. After some time, Rev. McSwine, Father Machesky out at the mission (St. Francis Center), Rev. ... who was out here ...?

Sinsheimer: Rev. Rucker would have been at ...?

Johnson: Yeah, and there was one other one at Jennings Temple.

Sinsheimer: Rev. Tucker?

Johnson: Rev. Tucker was at Turner's (Chapel). There was one more.

Sinsheimer: Rev. Wallace?

Johnson: Wallace, right. And also Rev. Kimball, I don't know if they mentioned him or not. Because he was fired, he was fired at Baptist town at the time. He was pastor at

First Baptist Church. Now he is at, he was fired for several years there but then he is pastoring _____ which is in town now. We made our first march downtown after Dr. King's assassination, he was the one had led the march, went out and led it.

Sinsheimer: But he was fired after that, or before that?

Johnson: He was fired right around that time. Just immediately after the involvement in the march and all. Well I guess somehow they could get to the Deacon Board easier, because they had a closer working relationship with the white community than I think that we did. I don't know Southern Baptists had a way of working with the black community openly during that time than most other black religious groups.

Sinsheimer: Your church was (the) First Christian?

Johnson: It was, but we had to, brought a law suit against us so we had to change our name. Let me see if I have anything on that right quick. (Break) And after we became involved (in civil rights activity) then we had to change our name. That is not the page there is it?

Sinsheimer: Well it says here ...it was changed to East Percy Street (Church) in 1964.

Johnson: Okay. Then that is it then.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember when you first met (Willie) Peacock or Sam Block? Did they come calling on you?

Johnson: Yes, in the very early stages. See, I am not real sure how we met but we, I guess through the barber shop. And then you know involvement. And where they were living was just a half block from my shop, upstairs.

Sinsheimer: On Avenue I there?

Johnson: Right. So from there it all started. During that time, well some years later when Dr. King made his first trip we stole him from the Justice Department, FBI, and all and brought him out here.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember the period of time when the commodities were cut off in '63? When they started busing in, trucking in the food? And handing it out at Wesley Methodist? Were you involved at all in that whole process?

Johnson: Very little, very little because I was trying to keep a business going. At that time there was so much pressure applied our membership, our attendance dropped down to where my offering was just \$17 a Sunday. My church headquarters sent me money. You might want to check with them because they sent me money for eight months, \$50 a week. That is the only way that I could stay here. Out of Indianapolis.

Sinsheimer: And what was the national affiliation?

Johnson: What did they call that? They call it the Missionary Christian Society. And the guy was named _____ and _____ and _____, those were the guys that came down and was involved in helping us, you know, see things through.

Sinsheimer: So it was in that very early period when your membership started dropping?

Johnson: Right. Dropped down to where the offering was down to \$17.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember what it would have been before that?

Johnson: Around \$40.

Sinsheimer: Around \$40. So \$50 a month went a long way.

Johnson: A long way. Fifty dollars a week is what they were sending.

Sinsheimer: Oh, \$50 a week.

Johnson: Fifty dollars a week. Other than that I would have had to move because Ozark had to move. He was in Jackson at the time and he ended up moving to Columbus, Ohio. And John came down from Cincinnati and worked with us. _____ and _____ they came out of Indianapolis and church headquarters and helped us out. As a matter of fact my youngest brother was jailed around the time. At a boycott, picketing downtown. He is out in California now. He pastored down at a Christian church down in Jackson about three years, maybe four....

Sinsheimer: I am sure it is in here but when did you come to Greenwood?

Johnson: I come to Greenwood when I was discharged from the service in '47.

Sinsheimer: Was there any sort of activity here in the fifties?

Johnson: Under Rev. Harper and a guy who used to run a service station on MacLaurin, a service station on MacLaurin. Mr. West that is his name. We used to slip and meet as far back as 1954 at the Elk's hall upstairs. Maybe that is where I started working as I think about it more because we used to sneak and meet, say we were having a lodge meeting and we would sneak and meet and try to work on some things. Because Mr. West was very active, he and Rev. Harper.

Sinsheimer: So they might have been people that Peacock or Block might have visited early on?

Johnson: Right, right. Mr. West ended up having to leave. He left and went to California and stayed until missed the bulk of the heat. He came back now he is probably out to _____ or someplace like that.

Sinsheimer: When you were in the service, where were you serving?

Johnson: Not very long because I stayed in thirteen months and four days. Was inducted down at Camp _____, from there to Ft. Benning, Georgia; Ft. Benning to -- did my base training at Ft. Lewis, Washington; and from there back to Benning and home on furlough; and then Camp _____, Wisconsin. I was discharged Ft. Bradley, Wyoming.

Sinsheimer: Wow, you got around then.

Johnson: Got around for thirteen months (laughter).

Sinsheimer: Sure did.

Johnson: I had enough time here and I came home on my first furlough and got married. And then I had enough points to get out. I didn't really want to get out because I had taken the Airborne exam and I was going to be a trooper. But my mother raised so much cane with me (that) I just, she said if I was going to be in the service I shouldn't have gotten married....

Sinsheimer: When did you get involved with the church?

Johnson: Well, I have been involved in the church all my life. But I didn't start preaching until what-- twenty-eight years ago. Well in September it will be twenty-eight years.

Sinsheimer: 1957.

Johnson: My Dad died in '58, so I started just before he died.

Sinsheimer: What do you remember of Dick Gregory when he came in in the Spring of 1963? Do you think that was important?

Johnson: I thought it was important. At that time we had decided, several of us had decided that someone had to stay out of jail to help get the others out. So we just started backing off into the background. And when someone would get in jail it would be our job to get them out. Somebody had to stay out. I was one of the guys that always when (the) police started pulling in, we would always sneak out. Always missed going to jail, because I tried to stay out of the camera. I never wanted to be on the camera. Did not ever want to be on camera. Even now I don't like it, the spotlight. Because once you get in the spotlight you are in trouble. I always wanted to ease along and be a part of it but not so much as the guys that made headlines. And doing it that way you would have less pressure. Sometimes you could do more that way than you can, you know, out front.

Sinsheimer: Were you able to raise bond money here in town to get people out of jail? Raise bail?

Johnson: No , the only thing that we did was just contact people that we thought were in position to sign property bonds. These of course were people who ...

Sinsheimer: To sign property bonds? Do you remember who some of those people were who were willing to take that risk?

Johnson: Reverend McSwine, Reverend James, no Mr. James, Campbell.

Sinsheimer: James Campbell?

Johnson: James Campbell.

Sinsheimer: What did he own? His home?

Johnson: A pressing shop and his home.

Sinsheimer: What kind of shop?

Johnson: A cleaner's.

Johnson: Dave Sanders, I know you must have heard of him.

Sinsheimer: Right, he has passed away now.

Johnson: No, he is one that housed SNCC down on Broad Street. Henry Harris.

Sinsheimer: Was that his home?

Johnson: That was his home. He had several houses. Who else? I can't think now. Those were the basic ones though because they would just go over and over and over again.

Sinsheimer: And how much could you sign a property bond for?

Johnson: I am not sure. Because it never was too very much. In a sense I guess it was jailed for misdemeanors. Happened an awful lot to my knowledge.

Sinsheimer: You started before to say something about Dick Gregory?

Johnson: I never did work very close with Dick Gregory. Because at that time people were going to jail a little more, and like I said we stayed back, someone had to stay back and help bail them out of jail. So several of us decided to do that.

Sinsheimer: Did you ever meet Bob Moses?

Johnson: Yes. He was down there at _____ ... I met him down there at a workshop.

Sinsheimer: At where?

Johnson: Edwards, that is between Jackson and Vicksburg.

Sinsheimer: At a workshop? What did you think of Bob?

Johnson: I thought he was a swell guy.

Sinsheimer: What about, were you ever part of the Minister's Alliance?

Johnson: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: And trying to work with the city (laughter)? Trying?

Johnson: I had the job of working-- well we had (a) split on our side. We had the Baptists against the Methodists and Catholics. This created a real problem. My job was just to keep them working together. That was a real tough fight. Wow.

Sinsheimer: The split was on religious lines but also on political lines?

Johnson: I think one group felt that they could lead, and the other group felt that they could lead, and the others didn't want to follow them, the rest of the groups didn't want to follow them. My job was to try to keep them on a working relationship so that the two groups could work together. So even now we just have a Ministerial Alliance, and it is basically on this side of town, it is basically Baptist. Like I am a Disciple and you have your different Methodist which have very little association with the Baptist groups. They just stay apart.

Sinsheimer: What is your, is over half the town Baptist?

Johnson: Far more than half.

Sinsheimer: Far more than half. And it would have been that way twenty years ago too?

Johnson: Yeah.

Sinsheimer: So really for the Movement, they had to get those Baptist churches open?

Johnson: Right, for things to work. And there was just plain pressure to open those churches. Pressure was just so great from the community.

Sinsheimer: From members of the churches?

Johnson: And still we had about seven churches here that didn't open About four of them never did open. Like our church, Wesley (Methodist), Turner's (Chapel), Jennings (Temple). I don't believe that Seven Day Adventist Church was open yet either, because at that time it was real, real small. That is probably basically why they didn't open up at that time. ... And then all the other Baptist churches started opening. In other words it was fear that started opening them. As you recall from some of the statements, a lot of black congregations, black churches were burned down at that time.

Sinsheimer: Did your church ever suffer any harassment?

Johnson: Other than driving by all the time. I guess the same night, I guess Medgar was killed, I believe that was the night. That night or the night before he had been up here, he told me, "Anything that I can do help be sure to call on me." I believe it was the night

Sinsheimer: The night before (he was assassinated).

Johnson: The night before.

Sinsheimer: So who did he meet with up here.

Johnson: He met and came to our church at the meeting. Anything he could do to help us we should let him know.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Johnson: But I tried, I don't know maybe it is a weakness on my part, I never thought of doing anything like this (recording or writing), I just tried to get it out of my mind and get my mind free. I was weighing about 140 maybe 143. And during that time I lost weight down to 130.

Sinsheimer: Just from the stress.

Johnson: Just from the stress!

Sinsheimer: How about your barbershop? Was that ever harassed?

Johnson? Every night. Somebody would be parked out there to watch me home. What broke that up I decided that one night I was going to follow them home (laughter). I got him ... and he didn't come back anymore. I wish I had done that a long time ago. And then I had some ladies that use to watch for me. They would always be there when I closed. They would never really just stand in the way but they would always be standing out there where somebody, where they could see what was going on. About three of them, they helped me out an awful lot....

If I was going any place I would always take a lady with me. If I wanted to go to West Point or wherever I was going I would always take a lady with me, and tell my wife that I was going to take a lady with me. Whoever the lady was I would let her know who she was. Anytime we saw police she would always be close up under me. She might be over to the far side but when we were going through a town she had to get close to me. This was my survival technique. Could always get away that way.

Sinsheimer: Did you ever meet Bishop Golden, the Methodist Bishop at that time?

Johnson: Golden?

Sinsheimer: Right. He would have been based out of I think Nashville.

Johnson: I am not sure that I met him.

Sinsheimer: Because I have to say that one of the things that I am trying to figure out is that Hollis (Watkins) and Peacock told me that they were almost sure that Reverend Rucker got a lot of pressure from his Bishop, who would have been Bishop Golden to open up Wesley. And I was just trying to see if anybody else could confirm that. Because they said that he (Rev. Rucker) really never was with the Movement openly.

Johnson: Did they mention Dewey Greene to you, a member of Wesley. Okay.

Sinsheimer: Okay. I didn't know he was a member of Wesley?

Johnson: Yeah, he was a member.

Sinsheimer: Was he a strong memeber at the time?

Johnson: A strong memeber, very active in the civil rights movement. One of his sons George (worked for SNCC)...

Sinsheimer: Right. And then his other son applied to Oxford (Ole Miss) I think right, Dewey Jr. So he would have been putting pressure as well?

Johnson: Right.

Sinsheimer: Wow, that is interesting. Those are all the little connections that when you try to put the pieces together make sense. Did you go to the March on Washington?

Johnson: No, money was too light. I had a real money problem then. I was threatening really to move. But like I said after our Brotherhood started sending us \$50 a week, plus they helped me out with \$500. As a matter of fact I haven't paid that \$500 back. I have to figure out how to pay it back. It was tough.

Sinsheimer: They lent you \$500 as well?

Johnson: They loaned me \$500. I guess I am just getting where now I can afford to pay it back.

Sinsheimer: Oh, they lent it to you personally?

Johnson: They lent it to me personally, plus the \$50 a month. I just couldn't make it.

Sinsheimer: Right. What about Sam (Block) and Willie (Peacock), do you remember anything about them?

Johnson: I don't know, really other than they were regular guys that had a lot of ambition, they wanted to see things move. They just didn't give up easy. I think they had their moments of frustrations and all, but during it all they were steadily pushing forward. I might, I don't know Peacock might have been more of a born leader than Sam was or is. Willie could reach the crowd two ways, by talking and singing.

Sinsheimer: Do you remember where--after Burns, after Sam Block was forced to leave there, I guess he didn't have a place to stay at all, Sam Block.

Johnson: Right.

Sinsheimer: For a long time.

Johnson: I am not sure where he stayed then. I am not real sure.

Sinsheimer: Mr. Burns, did he own some other property too, or he was just a businessman?

Johnson: No, that was a rental property.

Sinsheimer: That was a rental property?

Johnson: It belonged to Mrs. Gardner at the time.

Sinsheimer: Mrs. Gardner? Who was she?

Johnson: She was a black lady and she owned it. I probably won't think of her first name.

Sinsheimer: So Burns was the real estate ...?

Johnson: Her husband was Percy Gardner so that will help you a lot in getting the correct name.

Sinsheimer: So then why would they have pressured Burns instead of the Gardners.

Johnson: I don't know really other than he was housing them. And Burns rented it from Mrs. Gardner. She was a pretty big

lady though. She had a lot of property. She was a member of Jennings Temple Church.

Sinsheimer: What about Father Machesky? Did you all think early on that he was really with you?

Johnson: I don't know, well I think we always had, I always had the final opinion that he was with us. Now there were others that maybe didn't. But I could understand the position, you know, that he was in. I have always, well for a long time, been of the opinion that you can do so much and then you have to hold back and hold tight. And this was the position that I took with him, that you could only do so much at a time. A lot of times they did things, we had to ask them to slow up so that all of the light wouldn't just shine on them. They would be steady moving and pushing and we would be moving back. And this was disturbing to the _____ community and a few others.

You know if we had a boycott on sometimes there would be anyone down there boycotting or walking the picket line but maybe two blacks and seven or eight whites. And we just had to try to keep it balanced. This was our hard job just to keep up. But the pressure, I don't know if we felt the impact of the pressure more than they did. Then I think again they had a lot of local support that you could imagine that they had.

Another one of the things that was disturbing, we had some guys who were picketing with us who were black, doggone if they were supposed to boycotting and then at night they would have their merchandise brought to their house. This was really disturbing. We found this out sometime later when things started cooling down a little. ... So this helped a lot. Things worked in so many different ways, to make it work. When you look back at it you say golly it is a little frightening. I guess it took all of that. You had some friends who you were picketing and then you had some that wasn't quite friends. All of that helped, but it did show, of course it made things better. I guess that is the reason that anymore of us didn't get hurt. Because their friends were out there.

Sinsheimer: I know it is hard to remember these things but in the Spring of 1963 when the first series of marches were happening, including when Dick Gregory was in town. I mean why, I mean as a local person, why do you think it sort exploded like that, You know Sam and Willie had been here a long time, there had been a lot of meetings, and all of a sudden you have got all these people marching?

Johnson: Well, the saying was outsiders were coming in to make trouble. That is about the only thing that I could come

up. That if they could keep outsiders out so to speak, then they could keep things as they were. I just don't know.

Sinsheimer: What about the relationship at that time of the police in the black community? Some of the reasons I ask is that some of the people said that they thought that Chief Larry was, that he had a pretty good reputation before all of this started compared to some of the rest of the people.

Johnson: I think that he was liked. I had a lot of respect for him. He was real firm in talk about the situation and he would tell you maybe, "Don't worry." And again I think they had to worry a little bit because you could see things changing a little bit. I think overall he was a man that understood both sides. And by understanding both sides, you know, he would work with you as best he could. I think what everybody wanted was as much friction cut down as possible.

Sinsheimer: If you could just help me a little bit more with, who would have been some of the other people locally that would have been doing things behind the scenes, because that is really important. I mean as you say there was enough that everybody could do, put up property bonds or open the church.

Johnson: John Henry Moore was a good one.

Sinsheimer: And what was his role?

Johnson: Just behind the scene and doing things because he was contractor and he couldn't _____ his hand at all. As a matter of fact he is responsible for our church buying the extra property that we have to extend the size of our church from where you see it there that frame building to that brick.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Johnson: He is responsible for us getting that, working through First Greenwood Bank and through our national office He is largely responsible for our church being like it is.

Sinsheimer: He was a building contractor?

Johnson: Yeah, he would build basically churches and he encouraged us to do it and then our church brotherhood gave us \$2500 matching funds. They would give us \$500 every time we raised \$500 until it reached \$2500. And we were able to

purchase the lot, five or six years ago. That must have been '78 or '79 when we dedicated the church.

Sinsheimer: Right. How about David Jordan's father, do you remember him, Cleveland Jordan?

Johnson: Yes, a good man. A God-loving man. He had a temper too. He would speak out in a minute, if he didn't like something he would let you know immediately.... No hesitation at all.

Sinsheimer: What did you think of Sampson? Mayor Sampson?

Johnson: I didn't know too much about him. I didn't know enough about him to pass an opinion on him. I didn't have any working relationship with him at all. Not any. At that time I wasn't up enough to be in any part of the community

Sinsheimer: I am trying to think of what else I need to ask you. Let me just think for a minute here. Let me see if I have this right in mind. When Sam Block first came here he started meeting with some people over at the hotel.

Johnson: Right.

Sinsheimer: And then it was just thought that maybe you all wanted to keep an eye on things a little bit more so that is why you opened up the church or?

Johnson: Well, I will tell you. We opened up our church because we didn't want our young ladies-- my daughter was one-- I didn't want them at the hotel. And rather than them being at the hotel we decided to open up the church.

Sinsheimer: What was your daughter's name?

Johnson: Fuyneva. She is an attorney now. So we just didn't want her and Rev. McSwine's daughter, Rev. Walker's daughter....

Sinsheimer: How would Block or Peacock have met them. Do you remember how they got that little group going?

Johnson: I am not real sure. Young people have a way of meeting and organizing. I guess that is the way they met. I am not sure how they met.

Sinsheimer: Let me ask you a few more questions about the summer, the summer of '64 when the white kids were here, when Stokley Carmichael was here. Do you remember much from that era?

Johnson: Not an awful lot. I married a couple, I don't even know their name (laughter).

Sinsheimer: You married a couple of the volunteers?

Johnson: I married two whites, both of them were from Pennsylvania too. Because they wanted ... to perform the ceremony. At that time I didn't have a record book, keep a record of mariages performed.

Sinsheimer: Right.

Johnson: But both of them were from Pennsylvania. And they told me that you just can't do it. ... Once you do that you are going to have leave town. I said well both of them are white, I don't see why I can't (laughter).

Sinsheimer: I know what I wanted to ask you. Question. It was in one of the statements, right when Sam Block first came to Greenwood, August of '62 I think it was, there had been a beating of McSwine, Walter McSwine? A fourteen or fifteen year old boy who was supposedly accused of being a peeping Tom?

Johnson: I don't remember that. I remember Jake McGee and his brother going to the movies.

Sinsheimer: I forgot to ask Reverend McSwine, he probaly would know since it is the same name. What about Mrs. Hamer. did you meet here?

Johnson: Yeah, I met her several times. More than several times. She met at our church. (Break)

Sinsheimer: (Did you ever get harassing phone calls?)

Johnson: ... Had all these kinds of problems. (They would call) "Do you love yourself? Do you love your children? Do you love your wife?" I don't know how many times guys tried to force me in the ditch. I drive with both feet most of the time now. Drive that way. Stay out of the ditch You learn to drive that way.

End of Interview.