

Transcript - Dr. Milton A. Reid (2003-03-20)

CARRINGTON: Your name and your title?

REID: Dr. Milton A. Reid, I am Pastor Emeritus of Gideon Riverside Fellowship and on the Board of Directors of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

CARRINGTON: Dr. Reid, can you give me your personal definition of segregation.

REID: Segregation is the separation of the races by race. It was a sociological condition into which I was born, and that Virginians made it real palatable for themselves.

CARRINGTON: And when did you first become confronted with segregation and how did it affect the view of yourself?

REID: I was seven years old, walking to school, two miles, when a white boy spit on me from the bus he was riding, and it dawned upon me why is he riding to school and I'm walking to school? And I raised that question with my father, who was a loving man, he was a fundamentalistic preacher, Baptist preacher, and he didn't have quite the answer, and I kept probing and kept probing. And when the first bus was run on that route that I was walking to school, I drove it, at 15 years old.

CARRINGTON: Where were you located when all of this happened?

REID: I was located in the Butts, Butts Station section of Chesapeake, Virginia, about a mile and a quarter I guess from Butts Station, in what was then Norfolk County.

CARRINGTON: And what were the conditions in Butts Station?

REID: Now as I look back at it, it was a very segregated little town stop. It was mostly for migrant workers or field workers who worked in the fields [gunnysack?] the potatoes, the spinach the corn, the beans, and what have you, sweet potatoes, white potatoes or orange potatoes, whatever you call them, cabbage, -- the general stuff that would grow, and most of the people there worked on farms, many of them were sharecroppers, a few of them found jobs at the Navel installations at Norfolk and Portsmouth.

My father, for instance, was working at Smith Douglas Fertilizer plant, and I'm not sure what his position was there, but I know he drove the truck and he carried men to work in this plant. But later on he retired from that when he went to the ministry and became pastor of a couple of churches, the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and the Pooles Grove Baptist Church in Woodville, North Carolina.

CARRINGTON: In those communities there was segregation, what were the living conditions like? Were you aware that you were you were living in a quote, unquote, impoverished area, what was the feeling?

REID: Initially, I was not aware. We had, as children, we lived in a neighborhood that was predominantly white, but my father owned five acres of land in that community, and we played together, and we did work around their homes when they needed some work done. And generally, we just knew that they were a different color. But I had no idea of the entrenched racism, personal and institutional that was going on around us. And I was just shocked when I could not ride to school, but as I said, when I did ride to school, I drove the bus.

CARRINGTON: Tell me that story about you and the bus, how you came back -- the reason why you drove the bus and the some of the incidents that happened around that bus?

REID: Must I tell that?

CARRINGTON: Yes.

REID: Well, this bus was number 20, a Chevrolet bus, and it had a governor on it as all school buses did, and the governor set the accelerator so that you couldn't go over 35 miles per hour. And under normal conditions, that's what we were doing.

It just struck me one morning that I could manipulate the accelerator to bypass the governor and to get up to 50 miles an hour. After putting out kids at school and was going to pick up some more children, near the Norfolk line, I came across the overhead bridge there right by the school, by Providence High School, and you can normally pick up a little speed going down the overpass, and something just came over me, said, you know, go for it, and I went for it. And I think I got up to about 55, 60 miles an hour, but no one was on the bus except me.

And when I stopped the bus to turn around to pick up the children, here come this white man coming and talking to me as if I were a boy showing off, and he was saying -- so I didn't know what was wrong with him. I thought maybe he'd lost his mind. And I didn't have my mother, father, sister or brother, no child around me, and I felt like I could say back to him what I wanted to say. Well, I did not curse. That wasn't on my agenda, but I said some ugly things to him.

And then he got higher, and I got higher. And well, finally, there could be no compromise, he got in his car and went on. And I picked up the kids, and I went on back to school.

Well, I wasn't in my class 15 minutes before the principal sent for me to come to the office, and he was asking me about the bus. I said, the bus is right out there. You -- put it -- let anybody drive it, they are not going to get but 35 miles an hour. And so he did. He sent two of the men out on that bus and they drove the bus for a couple of hours. They couldn't get but 35 miles per hour out of that bus.

And, later, I was called back into the office because that report was given to that man who stopped me, and I'd had no idea that he was the superintendent of schools who had stopped me and I had sassed him out, but he told the principal if they didn't replace me that the principal and the two men that took the bus out, they would also be replaced. So that was pretty heavy punishment and they found a replacement. He couldn't drive it as nice as I drove, but I think -- he kept it as 35 miles per hour.

CARRINGTON: I'm going to skip ahead a little bit. Prince Edward County Public Schools after the --

REID: Supreme Court decision.

CARRINGTON: -- Supreme Court decision.

REID: Yeah.

CARRINGTON: Tell us about Prince Edward County. Tell us what happened after the Supreme Court decision.

REID: Prince Edward County is -- was a poor county, to say the least, and the one warrior in Prince Edward County was L. Francis Griffin who was champion for better raises for the teachers, more qualified teachers, trying to fix up a failed system, and he was -- and when the

Supreme Court's decision came, well, we all looked forward to the end of segregation in the public schools, but Prince Edward County and Norfolk and another county, I keep forgetting this county up in Northern Virginia, they opted on the Massive Resistance to close their public schools rather than to obey the edict of the Supreme Court. And the schools were closed in Prince Edward County, and of course the whites opened up the schools for whites, but blacks had nowhere to go, and we began to have some pilgrimages of prayer to Prince Edward County.

CARRINGTON: Now, when you say "we," tell me who you are referring to.

REID: Well, the Virginia State Unit of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was organized back in the sixties, and in the early '60, '59, '60, I came to be the president of it. And I remember the largest turnout that we had one year might have been in '61 when we had people from Norfolk, I had board members from Norfolk -- from across the state, Northern Virginia and the Kilmarnock section of Virginia, Richmond, we were pretty much spread across the state. And we had the this pilgrimage of prayer to Prince Edward County of which Dr. King was to speak, but unfortunately Dr. King could not make it. And Dr. Ralph Abernathy was our speaker that day. But I think that pilgrimage of prayer gave a lot of attention to the nation and the world what was happening in Virginia, closing of those schools, for it was after that the closing of those schools, we went to see the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, and they began to work with some, for lack of a better -- groups and some other charitable foundations and got some funding to reopen those schools for black children. They were in churches or wherever they could assemble. And it was from there that Dr. King appointed me to go to Washington to talk with

Roy Wilkins, to talk with -- CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] and see the National Brotherhood --

CARRINGTON: A. Philip Randolph?

REID: A. Philip Randolph, yes. About the -- about having a March on Washington. He had written them letters but had wanted me to follow up with a personal visit, and of course I did that. And that's when we started getting into some actions. The pressure was put on the county, and we -- we finally got those schools reopened and we had children going to school with marshals and so forth.

CARRINGTON: Can you go back for a second. Describe that day of the pilgrimage of prayer. What were the activities that went on during that day?

REID: Well, I'll tell you, we had twice as many people as the church could hold.

CARRINGTON: How many people was that?

REID: I guess there was at least 1,500 folk there, but we had people standing on the outside and across the street, and the church was full. A choir came down from First Baptist Church in Petersburg, and of course Albert Frances Griffin was there and his choir, and we had Echoes, Sarah Patton Boyle, I guess I got her name right. It has been a long time. A few white people

who supported the reopening of the schools were also there. And it seemed like there was a oneness in Prince Edward County, a strong presence and a strong determination of those schools to be reopened and for Virginians to see a better way.

CARRINGTON: What were the things that you all did that day? What were the events during that day?

REID: Well, we marched that day from the church to downtown to the -- I believe it was at the courthouse. I'm not sure right now, but I got pictures with me of our marching that day. And after everybody who was to speak, spoke. It was a great coming together, it was a great reunion of thoughts and people who had never been identified with civil rights before were there. Some of the very conservative people were there. Some of the state leaders, like Dr. E. C. Smith, the late Dr. E. C. Smith from the Metropolitan Church in Washington, D.C., who was at the time the President of the State Baptist Convention, and Dr. J. B. Henderson out of Norfolk was there, Frank B. Wise was there, Walter B. Hamilton, Shiloh Baptist Church, he was present. So we had a cross section of folk who for the first time in their lives had confronted the wrongness of segregation and saw some possibilities of doing something about it, and they were there in large numbers. I could name others, but I'm getting a little old now.

CARRINGTON: You all marched to the General Assembly, did you not?

REID: Oh, yes. We had another prayer pilgrimage to the General Assembly, and had another one to the Mosque in Richmond, assembly, another year. It seemed that every year we would go on a march and calling people together.

CARRINGTON: Tell me about the one at the Virginia General Assembly; what did you accomplish there?

REID: I don't know what we accomplished there but we had a large presence of people, and whenever you can get people out of their lethargy or relaxed comforts at home in the winter to come out and make a protest, you make a statement. I can't tell you that the next day after that that they opened the doors of the school because that didn't happen. But it was an eating away at the infrastructure, a chipping away of the roots of old that helped to weaken and bring down the walls of segregation in the public school system.

CARRINGTON: Can you tell us what SCLC means, the letters?

REID: Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

CARRINGTON: And what did the SCLC do?

REID: SCLC would call people together. Dr. King said there were three things that we were to be working toward in the redeeming of the soul of America. And one of those things was

poverty. We were against poverty. We were against institutional and personal racism. And we were against war. They were the three prongs. And he took stands on all of them at the Poor People's Campaign, with the Voting Rights Bill, to give other people a chance to get elected, and of course his last -- his final stand was against the Vietnam War.

CARRINGTON: And what did the SCLC do in Virginia in particular?

REID: Well, we did a lot of things in Virginia. We protested under Mills Godwin, and we got some blacks on the state police, and for a time I didn't know whether it was a good sign or not. But ultimately it was a good sign. We got blacks on the toll booths. You know, we had a lot of toll roads in Virginia back in those days, soon after that. But we kept chipping away to get the schools funded and protect teachers who would be put out had they been members of the NAACP.

For instance, my wife was involved in an accident going to a meeting of -- a PTA meeting, and this lady came -- was coming up from Norfolk and cut in front of her and of course it was a terrible accident. Her lawyer went to court and told the judge that I was President of the NAACP, and that my wife was going to make a speech for me during -- which had nothing to do with the accident, which was absolutely not true. I never heard my wife give anybody a speech unless she is giving me a speech telling me what I better do, and of course I always did it, very willingly, but she was not a speech maker, and she was going to the PTA, but that was the mind set, if you

were involved in NAACP you were a bad one or you were a communist, or you didn't think like they thought, but SCLC's job was to redeem the soul of America.

SCLC called attention to the going wrongness in our nature or -- or in our nation and in our nature, and SCLC would bring pressure to bear until some changes were made, and SCLC has been doing that for the last 42 years. I was the founding president. I'm now Chairman of the Board of the Virginia State Unit of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

CARRINGTON: Some of the techniques you used were sit-ins and boycotts?

REID: Yes.

CARRINGTON: In the whole frame of sit-ins, did you all train people on how to do sit-ins, and if you did, what was that training that you gave?

REID: September Clark was our trainer, and of course Dr. Cotton was also one of the trainers and non-violent techniques. We got a lot of training before we went out on the demonstrations. As a matter of fact, that was my job in Danville, to help train the demonstrators in non-violent tactics, and we called as against -- attention to what was -- to what the problem was.

You'd be surprised to know that a lot of people didn't even know what the problem was, I mean a lot of black people didn't know what the problem was, they didn't understand that. Preachers

from the pulpit didn't know what the problem was. They were just going out there agitating, but they didn't know that it takes agitators to clean their clothes and unless you agitate you don't get something done, so we never felt any shame or that it was any sham to do what we did.

We had some kneel-ins, and I always questioned the kneel-ins but I am going to call on the Lord no matter where I am, and I don't have to go in that church to kneel and pray, because I didn't think the Lord was in there anyway. I would rather to stick with the things that bring attention.

On our way to Danville, for instance, we integrated a little restaurant. It was a national chain, Stuckey's. And everybody -- nobody there was getting minimum wages. We brought that chain to bear, to face itself, had it in court in Florida.

CARRINGTON: How did you do it?

REID: Sitting in. And if they said, okay, here's a cup of coffee for 2 cents, and here's a hot dog for 3 cents, pay me, you can eat it. We couldn't pay it because many times we sit at a lunch counter and didn't have a dime, and Curtis Harris was famous for that. We did a lot of sitting in together particularly in South Hill, Virginia, of course in Hopewell and in Danville.

CARRINGTON: For the kids who are going to watch this who don't understand what sit-ins are, give me a description of what a sit-in is and what it does to the person that you are sitting in on.

REID: Well, you go into a restaurant, and you take a seat, preferably at the counter, Woolworth's had a lot of counters in all of the stores, and you just sat there, you didn't sing, you didn't shout, you didn't disturb people, but you just sat there waiting to be waited on, knowing you weren't going to be waited on, but that brought about some mixed emotions to the white people that were coming in to eat. They didn't want to eat in the midst of some confusion not knowing what was going to happen because if these children, these black folk, if they got nerve enough to come in here and sit down, we don't know if they are going to start fighting or just what, but in the whole history of the Civil Rights movement I don't recall of any demonstrator who was sitting in got up started fighting.

CARRINGTON: What was the reaction of the white people who watched or sat there or who gathered around you during the sit in?

REID: It was mixed, but for the most part, they wanted us out, they wanted us to go away. Sometimes they would say things. I remember coming on that March from Selma to Montgomery when I was marching on the outside. One of the people who had been a parcelman, had tobacco juice running down the side of his mouth, had his gun, electric prod or billy stick in his hand, and he looked at me as if to say this is the one, that's the one I'm going to get. But that one passed over when they stopped us and told us we couldn't go, and Dr. King said we'll pray here in a road awhile, we were praying. President Johnson sent word for us not to go that day, they were going to deputize the Alabama State Police and all of those people who were out

there to be beat us up, he was going to deputize them to protect us as -- the next day, and that's what happened.

CARRINGTON: Now, if I were a person in the sit-in, and sitting at the counter, and people, white people around me start this bit, berate me, all this kind of stuff, what was my reaction to be?

REID: Non-violent, no matter what they said to you, curse you out, talked about -- even talk about your momma. You were to just absolve that and to be non-violent. And that has won more battles for us in the Civil Rights movement than anything that we know.

CARRINGTON: Tell me a little bit about what happened in Danville in 1963.

REID: Well, Danville was a hard one. It was a hard core -- as you know, Danville was the last seat of the Confederacy, when they left Richmond and ended up in Danville. It was very, very difficult to get anything shaken loose in Danville. Everything was segregated, and there were no blacks in power, other than in the First State Bank in Danville, and it certainly is a miracle how that bank has survived even until this day. But the police and the firemen and all of their cohorts unmercifully beat up blacks who were sent off to the little community hospital, I think it was Winslow Hospital on Deck Street, a one-story building, and Mrs. Beatrice Campbell, wife of Bishop Campbell was beaten in that demonstration -- well, the thing turned violent by the city with the dogs and whatnot.

That's when Dr. King sent me to Danville, and of course we had another demonstration that same time. People came out to demonstrate anyway. And a lot of the same things that, you know, had been going on, they wouldn't allow them to be going on, and you couldn't picket the stores, you couldn't cause no confusion in the town, or couldn't stop traffic. They wanted things as usual. And they were fighting to maintain the status quo, blacks over here and whites over here, the separation of the races.

CARRINGTON: And what did you do? Tell me about your event from the hotel when you went up to Danville to work on that issue and to organize?

REID: Yeah, well, I went to Danville. As I said, I got there about time for the mass meeting, and I went straight to the mass meeting, but I didn't know people in Danville, I didn't know -- I hadn't even thought about where I was going to stay, but I remembered, and I called the Holiday Inn, and they had even made my reservation at the Holiday Inn, and of course they accepted my reservation, but when I got there, they couldn't find it.

And I looked across and I said, there's my name right there. And she looked at my name and she said, sir, I'm going to have to call the manager 'cause there is something wrong here.

So then she called the manager who came down telling me how non-racist he was, he was from Connecticut. And of course, the story picks up there, when I told him that I was tired, and I was

going to take my -- I was going to stay there that night, and I took off part of my clothes and stretched out on the sofa, and nobody bothered me. The Lord protected me all the night long but I had no other problem.

CARRINGTON: How about breakfast the next morning?

REID: Oh, I got the breakfast. I got up. I went in the mens room, washed up, as much as -- washed up as I could, and I went in the restaurant and I sat -- took my seat at a table, and had a table cloth, and some condiments, little bouquet of flowers, and silverware, napkins, and I set there for about ten minutes, and soon the waitress came over and took all of that off my table, left my table bare.

And a gentleman sitting across from me had come to his table with his breakfast, and he stared at me as if to say, well, what are you doing in this restaurant? And I stared back at him. So we had no audible words, but there were communication. And he didn't like what I was saying through my eyes. I didn't like what he was saying through his eyes. So he saw that I wasn't going to move. He finally got up and moved. And I finally got over and took his food and put it on my bare table. And I had breakfast, and went by the cashier and said, thank you all very much, and went on to my car saying, I woke up this morning saying, my mind stayed on Jesus, and it was a great morning, and a great victory, the Lord watched over me all night long, he protected me from danger seen and unseen, and I am very grateful.

Now, had I been thinking I don't know whether I would have done that or not, but it was just something that I like felt like that I had to do, and I did it. So you have to make up your mind as young people, old people, people all in between, that you got to be led by a higher power and whatever the consequences are you are going to take them.

CARRINGTON: What else would you tell young people today about social injustice and making sure that the principles of the movement don't die and they need to be vigilant in them, what would you tell them?

REID: Everything you just said, that you can't take things for granted. Usual, what seems to be, isn't what it is. And when you -- well, we have a Sunday school lesson this Sunday it talks about rejection and mission. You got to learn how to handle rejection because you are going to be rejected. This is a racist society and a racist world in which we live. Now, I'm not saying everybody in it are racists, but they can't help it. Most of them, unless you have been -- you have got to make a conscious decision that I'm going to love everybody, that I'm going to be fair, that I'm going to be open to everybody, and unless you have that conscious decision to do that, you are going to go along with the crowd and hide by the color of your skin.

I was reading the Ebony Magazine front page last week. They said after Halle's Oscar, blacks still don't get no respect in Hollywood, you know. It is all over. It is pervasive. It is what the country was built on. It is one reason we are in a war right now. No one has thought about -- well, let me put it, someone did think about it, too. Saddam Hussein raised the question of or

Saddam, one of the two -- who appointed Bush master of the world, or who appointed him the person to deal with this communication of weapons --

CARRINGTON: Weapons of mass destruction?

REID: Yeah, weapons of mass destruction, while the United States has more weapons of mass destruction than any other country in the world. The second to it is Russia. We got stockpiles. Who is going to tell us to get rid of our stockpiles? You know? But we have a hype based on race in this country that we are better than the rest of the world, and that the world has to be -- has come under our concept of democracy, and nobody -- well, we did challenge it, too, but folks forget about the fact that Bush wasn't elected president. He was selected president by the Supreme Court, that all the votes in our democracy weren't counted. And you know, who made you the overseer? And folk got to understand that you don't need to go along just to be going along. You got to think. You got to come up with an ideological framework of thought for yourself that rhymes with life. You have to be independent. You got to be able to stand up for what's right and make your own determination as to where you are going to be on your tomorrow, and that depends on what you do today.

CARRINGTON: For Virginians, we have had a role in the whole Civil Rights movement from the beginning. Today, what should Virginians, young and old, what should they be doing to continue the march to that goal of equality in this society?

REID: We got to become participants. You become participants, you got to register, and you got to vote. And it's not voting against white folks. You got to vote against some black folks who don't know the way yet. But you got to vote for what you believe is right, and when you elect a person then you've got to -- don't elect them and leave them, but you got to elect them and they must be responsible to your vote.

Now, I don't know anybody who is playing this game any better than that Congressman Bobby Scott. Scott is everywhere. I don't know when he gets a chance to do what he does in Washington, but if your dog died, he'd be at your funeral. He's going to be everywhere people are. He is going to be unbeatable. And yet, he could take a stand against the war and call town meetings in Norfolk, the largest naval installation in the world. He was down there talking about [inaudible] going into this war. Now, I can support a Congressman Scott when he takes these kinds of stands. You don't just go along to go along or to get along. It's not peace at any price. Jesus said, any man that comes after me must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow after me. Well, this is what the young folk have to do today. You don't accept what is. Isness is isness, and oughtness is oughtness. Isness is what you do, oughtness is what you ought to be doing. And this is the kind of message that we ought to be doing, not because the other groups are cutting class, taking drugs or dealing with drugs, dealing with a lack of scholarship. You got to avoid that bunch. And if they don't go along with you in academic pursuits or in social uplift, social betterment, don't hinder me. I'm going that way. And it is only through this way generation after generation, after all the Milton Reids have been put under the sod, perhaps somewhere in the future we won't have to fight this battle, but right now it's got to be fought.

CARRINGTON: Is there anything else you want to tell this audience about Civil Rights in Virginia, the things that you have done?

REID: Civil Rights in Virginia has been my battlefield for a long time, and its not over yet. There will be people trying to demand your allegiance or your -- for instance, in January of this year [inaudible] I was getting these letters from the Republican Party telling me that I was selected as Republican of the year, and I don't know how that got out, but I'm not a Republican. I have supported some Republican candidates for governor, not for the Presidency, but -- and for the House. But I guess they were telling me I was going to meet with the president, and I don't want to meet with the president, because I don't know when the Lord is going to send his righteous lightening down. I don't want to be there, don't want to be there.

But I want to tell these Virginians that you have to be wise, as selfless and harmless as dogs, that you got to fight poverty, you've still got to fight institutional and personal racism, and you have got to help lead the nation and the world to an alternative to war.

CARRINGTON: Thank you, sir.

REID: Thank you.

CARRINGTON: You can stop tape.

END.