Rev. Dr. Mouzon Biggs

He served Boston Ave. Methodist Church as a dedicated minister and passionate interfaith community leader.

Chapter 01 – 1:15
Introduction

Announcer: The Reverend Dr. Mouzon Biggs, Jr. came to Boston Avenue Methodist Church in 1980 from Beaumont, Texas, where for seven years he was pastor of the Trinity United Methodist Church. He served Boston Ave Methodist Church for thirty-three years, retiring in 2013 after fifty-four years in ministry.

Rev. Biggs led the development of an endowment fund to maintain Boston Ave's building. The structure was completed in 1929 and is a designated National Historic Landmark. Today, the endowment totals $26 million and has allowed the church to maintain its grounds and building—without requiring special finance campaigns. In 2004 the church completed a 38,000 square-foot addition to relieve overcrowded classrooms and provide new recreational and meeting facilities.

Influenced by two Jewish college professors who escaped Hitler's Germany, Rev. Biggs was led to create positive dialogue and cooperation among Jewish and Christian communities. He served twice as board president for the Oklahoma Center for Community Justice, and in addition was a board member of Downtown Tulsa Unlimited.

You will now hear Rev. Mouzon Biggs talk about his journey from Carthage, Texas to Boston Ave Methodist Church, on the oral history website *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

Chapter 02 – 10:22
Carthage, Texas

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is June 22, 2011.

Mouzon, if you will state your full name, please, your date of birth, and your present age.

Mouzon Biggs: My full name is Marvin Mouzon Biggs Jr. I was born January 2, 1941, in Carthage, Texas. I'm seventy.

JE: Tell us where we're recording this interview.

MB: This is in my office at the Boston Avenue United Methodist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: You were born in Carthage, Texas?

MB: Yes.

JE: Do you know the name of the hospital you were born in there? Is it still there?

MB: No, there was no hospital. It actually was in a doctor's clinic, a couple of beds where women could birth babies, but there was no hospital. Dr. Hooker was the guy's name. I've heard my mother mention Dr. Hooker, that's all I really know about him.

JE: Let's talk about your mother. Your mother's name and where she was from, where she grew up.

MB: My mother's name was unusual, it was Tula, T-u-l-a, Hightower. She was born in St. Augustine, Texas, which is probably sixty miles south of Carthage where I was born. But her family had moved when she was a child, up to Carthage, Texas. They were farmers, in fact, sharecroppers, back in the Great Depression days and she was the baby of a very large family.

JE: Describe her for us.

MB: My mother was, of course, wonderful to me. She graduated high school, was married to my father shortly thereafter. Two years later, I was born. Eleven months later, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and World War II was on.

My father was not drafted into the war until 1943. I don't remember that part, of course, but my father worked for a little natural gas company. We lived in a company house six miles outside of Carthage, Texas, at a big compressor station. But when my father was drafted the company made us move out of the house. And we had to go live with her parents, where they were sharecroppers, right on the edge of a large farm. They worked very, very hard to get half of what they produced.

It was an old farmhouse with no electricity, no running water, no natural gas, not even propane, butane. Wood-burning stove, fireplace, horribly hot in the summer and bitterly cold in the wintertime, is what I remember as a child.

My mother had never really been brought up in the church. Her family were good, honest, hardworking people, but not church people.

My little sister had been born two years after I was, so she had two little ones when my dad was shipped off to Germany. I've heard her tell that story. She decided she really needed spiritual help and started taking us a nearby church.

I remember her telling that after that first Sunday night when she was tucking me into bed, I said, "Aren't we going to pray?"

And she said, "What?"

And I said, "Pray. They said this morning we should pray before we sleep."

And she said, you know, in her own heart, *I don't know how to pray. Nobody had ever taught me how to pray. But I said in my deepest heart, "God, if you will help me say something fairly intelligent in front of this three-year-old, I will learn how to pray.*

So my mother became a wonderful Christian, very interested in her children. And, of course, my father, as soon as he was back from the war, she was a stay-at-home mom all the years I was growing up but became very involved in PTA, all things related to the church: United Methodist Women, back when it was called the Women's Society of Christian Service. Went to those kinds of meetings. We were in church Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night prayer meeting. She really gave everything to her family.

I had a little brother born later, so the three of us growing up, she had this great dream that her children would go to college. Both she and my dad had this dream and I remember early memories of her tucking me into bed at night, saying a prayer with me, but saying, "When you get to SMU." She had never seen SMU, she knew it was Methodist and it was big, and as far as she was concerned, that meant it was good, it's big and Methodist, it's got to be good.

And I and my sister and brother are all SMU grads. And both of my sons are SMU grads now.

JE: Your brother and sister, their names?

MB: My sister's name is Jacqueline. She, after college, met and married a young Texas Aggie engineer named Manual Rodriguez. They've been married all these many years, have two sons who are also Aggie graduates now. My sister was a second grade school teacher all of her working years.

My brother's name is Warren Thomas Biggs. He was just the right age to be drafted into the Vietnam War. Served with distinction in Vietnam. Came back and became a Dallas police officer. After eight years, decided he couldn't make a living as a policeman. He had gotten married by that time and he and his wife had two little boys. So he went back to SMU, took advanced studies in banking, went back to our hometown, and has been president of a bank in our hometown all these many years.

JE: Your mother, didn't she write a news article for the *Watchmen*?

MB: She did, yes.

JE: The *Panola Watchmen?*

MB: I didn't know you knew that. Yes, my mother was asked at one time to write a devotional for Church Women United there in Carthage.

Someone said, "Oh, that is so good, that's so good. You think we could put that in the *Panola Watchmen*?" It was a little weekly paper.

She said, "Well, okay, sure."

So they ran her devotional in the paper and the next week, the little paper was flooded with calls, saying, "Why don't you have her write something else?"

And she wrote a weekly column for twenty-five years. Yeah, she did. "First Things First," she called it.

JE: And then she took up jogging late in life, actually.

MB: She did. After my brother, the youngest of the three, was out and on his own, she actually went to work at an insurance office there in town and became a physical fitness buff herself and was a jogger for many years.

In her fifties, maybe early sixties, I guess, still was running in 5 kilometer races there in our hometown. When she got to the point she couldn't run anymore she rode a recumbent bike on into her seventies.

JE: That's remarkable.

MB: Yeah.

JE: And then that's very remarkable from her lack of knowledge of the church—

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . to become a leader in the church.

MB: Right.

JE: Is what she did. And you, as a young boy, obviously watching all this.

MB: Yes.

JE: She had to have a tremendous influence on your life. Isn't there a story about when she would tuck you in at night—

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . and she would tell you were a special child?

MB: Yes, at the same time that she would, you know, just mention college, and I was a small child, I had no idea what SMU was at that point. But she would also tell me, "There's something special about you. I just have this feeling that there's something very special about you. And one day God will help you figure out what that is."

I didn't know until years later, she did the same thing to my sister. And when our little brother came along, she did the same thing to him. And again, it didn't mean we all had to be clergy.

My sister taught school in the public schools down at the manned Space Center for almost thirty years. And my brother has been a bank president for more than thirty years.

JE: It pointed out the importance of parents telling our children how important they are.

MB: Yes. And that there's a special place for you. I read in the *National Education Association Journal* years ago that a child who lives with praise will develop a sense of destiny. And I think I and my sister and brother developed a sense of destiny that we had been sent to this time and this place to do something significant.

JE: Yeah. Then your father and his full name?

MB: My father's full name was Marvin Mouzon Biggs Sr. He was named for two Methodist bishops. My grandparents had heard two bishops preach in their lifetimes and one was old Bishop Enoch Marvin, one was a French American named Edwin Dubose Mouzon. They named my father the surnames of those two bishops. He was their only son.

My father never felt called to be a minister but I did feel called when I was a senior in high school, you know, so the names came from two distinguished bishops of the Methodist church.

JE: Did you grow up using Mouzon or Marvin?

MB: I did, Mouzon, yeah.

JE: Was that difficult for you as a youngster, to get that name right?

MB: You know, not really. There was a cartoon character back there named Marvin and he was a nerdy little kid. I didn't want to be Marvin.

Years later, I met a very distinguished lawyer in Houston, who was with the biggest law firm in town, a senior partner named Marvin Collie. And I decided, *That's not a bad name at all.*

But Mouzon was the name I went by. And people say, "But what do they call you?" They call me Mouzon. You know, if your parents keep calling you Mouzon, other people tend to call you Mouzon as well.

JE: Right.

MB: Yeah.

JE: Your father, what did he do for a living?

MB: My father did not finish high school. He had five sisters, he was the only son, as I had mentioned. The family had a little more than my mother's people but not much. They did own their own farm.

My grandfather was older than my grandmother and was sort of sickly his last years. And my dad really felt in that Great Depression, the 1930s I'm talking about, that he had just had to drop out of school and keep the farm going to support his mother and five sisters.

He got a job with this little natural gas company there in Carthage and worked for them forty-three years. He started what they used to call a roustabout, which meant a shovel. He was digging ditches, doing whatever they needed doing. But by hard work and loyalty to the company, he eventually was the superintendent of their East Texas operations there. It wasn't a huge paying job but it was a job with some responsibility.

And my father became a loved person in the community, served on the hospital board. Once they had a hospital, he did a lot of significant things himself with the limited background that he had had growing up. He wanted very much for all of us to be college

graduates. He and my mother both knew what education could do and, of course, it has done that for us.

And I have two sons. My sister has two sons. My brother two sons. And all six of them college graduates, doing wonderfully well. They were pallbearers when my father died, pallbearers when my mother died.

Chapter 03 – 4:56
A Shy Child

John Erling: As a young boy in the Carthage area—

Mouzon Biggs: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . oil fields—

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . and all this, maybe you can talk about your first remembrances. You go back to three years old, I think you just said—

MB: Yeah, yeah.

JE: . . . when you asked your mother to pray.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: The first house you remember, the first school you attended, some of those thoughts.

MB: Yeah. As soon as the war was over and my father came home from the war, he was in the 86th Black Hawk Infantry Division, saw a lot of action in Germany that last fateful year of '44, '45. He was in Patton's 3rd Army that rushed toward Bastogne in that cold, cold winter of 1944. So my dad saw a lot of action there.

Because he was later into the war than some, his unit was picked up immediately when the war was over in Europe and shipped to the Philippines to become a part of MacArthur's Army to get ready to invade Japan.

When he came back, we moved back to the little company house. It was very modest; this was the oil company house. But it had free natural gas, right from the wells. It wasn't cool in the summer but it was wonderfully warm in the winter.

I rode a school bus every day for twelve years. I never had a car when I was growing up. So I rode the school bus into Carthage, Texas. Went all twelve years there, as did my sister and brother afterward.

I was a shy child, I really was. I didn't feel I had as much as other people did. The country kids didn't tend to have a much as the kids who lived in town. I remember the distinction of going to school and town kids wore blue jeans, the boys did, and I had

striped overalls. So I was shy, but I was a good student. I worked really hard at being a straight-A student.

In the seventh grade, my mother again, said to me one time, "I've read a book that I think could help you. Would you be willing to read my book and [indecipherable]?"

Well, it turned out to be Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking*. And I read that book where Peale talks about accenting what you do best, concentrating on what you do best. I read Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. How you think of something really wonderful just before you walk into a room, so you walk in with a smile on your face and your head held up high. All of those things began to help me.

I worked even harder at being a good student. I ran for student council and was elected. My ninth grade year I was president of the Junior High Student Council. I went out for the football team in the seventh grade. They told me I was too little. I practiced every day. I never got in a game. Eighth grade year, same. I practiced every day, never got in a game. All I ever heard was, "You're too little, you're too little." Ninth grade year, the same.

But in the spring of that year, I went out for football with the big guys and I'd read the books. I'd been giving this a lot of thought. I geared up my courage and went in and said to the coach, "I will do whatever it takes to make this team."

And he took me seriously. He helped me get a pair of track shoes and said, "I want you to run 365 days in the year." He talked to me about lifting weights and what that could do. He talked to me about what I was eating and not eating and how I could eat better and more of certain foods.

I was a starter my sophomore year. I was defensive captain my junior year. My senior year we went all the way to State Quarter Finals. It was a real morale booster for me. I became somebody. I was the vice president of the Student Council my junior year and president of the Student Council my senior year. The faculty voted me one of the ten outstanding students in high school both junior and senior year. And the junior high faculty my ninth grade year. So a lot of good things began to happen to me and I gained confidence. Success brings confidence.

I had wonderful teachers, terrific. Most of the people who lived in Panola County, Texas, did not have much money, but the school district did because of the oil and gas tax dollars. So we had great teachers. We had the best football equipment. Our band had new wonderful instruments and uniforms. Our laboratories, of course, were also wonderful, I mean, our chemistry labs and physics. It was a great place to go to school.

When I talk to teachers' groups I mention some of my teachers. One of them asked me one time after I got through, "How can you remember all of them?"

I said, "How can you forget them? I mean, first grade, right on through, I remember them all and how each one impacted my life." I was really blessed to have encouragers.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

MB: You know, teacher who encouraged me, who believed in me almost as much as my mother and father believed in me. They also believed I could do great things, that I was capable, as they believed others were capable of doing great things.

JE: So along this time while you were in school you were probably active in your church as well?

MB: Very much, yeah. We went three times a week, Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, every week.

Chapter 04 – 5:12
Call to Ministry

John Erling: Somewhere along the line, public speaking had to be standing out. When did it first hit you that *I think I'm good at this*, or somebody pointed it out to you, what were the circumstances?

Mouzon Biggs: A couple of things. I think one of the most significant was my running for student council office and becoming the president, where I presided. But in our high school, we had assembly programs every Friday. That meant every Friday was up in front of the entire student body, introducing the programs. I liked it.

I had a teacher, I saw him just a couple of years ago, he's ninety years old now, I had a teacher who wanted me to try out for debate. He believed that I had what it took to be a debater. I had a woman teacher who believed acting would help me and encouraged me to try out for the one-act plays for interscholastic competition.

So I started being on stage in the one-act plays. I was the lead in my senior play. I got into choir. I sang in the a cappella choir. We had a great young man come to our school who believed that this small high school could do Broadway plays, and I was in *Brigadoon* and I was in *The King and I*, and so on. All those kind of experiences began to sort of move together.

And then at my church for my senior year, every Sunday morning the lesson seemed to be, "But what does God want you to do with your life? But what does God want you to do?"

And where I'd grown up really thinking I would probably be a chemical engineer, I'd grown up around drilling rigs. I had seen how hard my father and other uneducated men had to work. I've seen them come down out of those derricks in the summer with mosquitoes perched on the back of their necks. I've seen them come down out of those rigs in the winter with icicles hanging off their hard hats, the derrick men.

But the chemical engineer was sitting out there in a little house, a little mobile home that had an air conditioner running in the summer and a heater in the winter. And I thought, *That's the job, the chemical engineer.*

But all these other experiences, even though I was good in math and science, I was gradually being turned more and more to where the humanities, really finding that I loved literature and I loved history and I loved these experiences of being in front of other people. And I enjoyed trying to be a leader of other people.

So Sunday after Sunday I'm hearing, "But what does God want?" And nobody was telling me the answer, just, "But what does God want you to do?" I'd been taught to pray and I did pray every night before I slept. And it was right near the end of April, first of May, my senior year in high school that, I don't know, I was convinced I was supposed to be a minister. I didn't tell my mother and father because I was so afraid I might be wrong. I was really afraid I might not be hearing that right.

And I went alone to speak to our pastor, set up an appointment with him, and he didn't push me, he just listened very carefully, asked me if I'd read a book.

I said, "Yes."

And he gave me a book that would just help me sort through. Still without telling my mom and dad. Because just one Sunday morning there just seemed to be this strong, strong urge in me to go forward during the singing of the closing hymn and tell the preacher God's calling you. That's what I did.

Then my grandmother Biggs, my grandfather died years before, she came down the aisle and hugged my neck and said, "Everybody in the family is going home with me for lunch. I've got to tell you a story." And then she told me that when my dad was born his father, having named him for two bishops, prayed every day that he would be called to be a preacher. He never felt that call.

So when I was born, he said to my grandmother, "I'm going to pray that this child, our little Marvin Mouzon, will be a preacher." And when he knew he was dying—I was still just a toddler—she said he told her, "Elizabeth, every morning before you get out of bed, every night before you sleep, pray. I want this child to be a Methodist preacher. If he never feels the call, never tell him. If he should ever feel it, you tell him."

She said, "Your granddaddy's prayer has been answered." That's the way it happened.

JE: And then your mother must have been elated.

MB: Yeah, and my father too. My dad was just as excited as my mom. They were really both very pleased.

JE: Because they were both in the service when you walked down that aisle?

MB: Oh yes, oh yes, yes, yes. My father was just as active as my mother. He came to love Methodist Men and was very faithful. Went to Methodist Men's retreats, you know, I

mean, a fall retreat, a spring retreat, that sort of thing. He loved the church as well. So he was very pleased.

JE: Interesting this call came to you without other outside forces. There wasn't anybody else within the church, "I think you ought to be a minister"? None of that happened, apparently—

MB: Not really.

JE: . . . it was all within your dialog with God.

MB: Yes, I think so, yeah.

Chapter 05 – 6:00
Early Preaching

John Erling: So then you graduated from high school.

Mouzon Biggs: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: In 1959.

MB: Right.

JE: Then college. Tell us where you went to school.

MB: Even though my mother and father did not have the money to send me to school, I had worked hard in the summers, I'd been saving what I could and I was accepted at SMU, had a dorm room reserved. They had promised to help me find work in Dallas and so on. I was working for a drilling mud company that summer, loading and unloading hundred-pound sacks of drilling mud.

And the district superintendent drove up one day where I was working. This was in August, first of August, and said, "We've got two little country churches out here and the pastor has split with his wife. He's dropping out of the ministry. I've called the bishop. We don't have anybody else. We understand you have felt a call to preach."

I said, "Yes."

And he said, "You're going to pastor these two little churches starting next Sunday."

I said, "I've never preached."

He said, "You're all we've got."

I said, "Well, I could help you a couple of weeks but then I have to go to SMU in Dallas," which was 175 miles away.

And he said, "No, no, I called Centenary College this morning," that's in Shreveport, Louisiana, forty miles from my home, and these two little churches were about halfway between my hometown and Centenary College. And he said, "If you'd passed everything at SMU they would be glad to have you. So you're going to go to Centenary."

I said, "No."

And he said, "Yes, you did want to be a Methodist preacher, didn't you?"

I said, "Yes sir."

He said, "Okay, this is what you're going to do. You'll go to college five days a week and Saturday you'll visit your parishioners, door to door. Saturday night, you write a sermon. Sunday morning, you drive seventeen miles and preach at the smaller church. You have thirty minutes to drive back to the bigger one and preach at eleven. You have all afternoon to write a sermon, which you will preach at seven o'clock and then you'll go back to college. Are we clear?"

JE: Tell me again who's saying this to you.

MB: My district superintendent, who's the bishop's right hand person, you know. We have a district superintendent over approximately fifty churches. Bishops over five to six hundred churches. So this was the bishop's man in that district. And in the old days, that's the ways bishops and district superintendents behaved.

JE: Your age then would have been?

MB: Eighteen.

JE: Eighteen years old?

MB: Yeah. I was eighteen.

JE: So do you remember the first sermon that you prepared and preached?

MB: I don't really, John. I don't remember. I didn't keep the notes on it. But I remember I told them everything I knew in about fifteen minutes—everything I knew I told it. I'm sure it was autobiographical of some sort, you know. And I was frightened out of my mind.

When I first started it was not unusual on Sunday mornings for me to have to pull over beside the road and run behind a tree and throw up and then go on. Really.

I met and started dating Gayle while I was in college. And one Sunday morning, she came out to my two little churches to go with me and hear what I could do. On the way to the smaller church I had to pull over beside the road and run out behind a tree and throw up. And when I got back to the car, she said, "And you're going to do this the rest of your life?"

I said, "Well, I hope it gets better, you know." [laughing] "I hope it gets better."

Guess what? After all these years I'm still about half nauseous on Sunday, not quite that much anymore, but I cannot eat breakfast on Sunday, I'm that nauseous.

When I see people at Boston Avenue, they say, "How are you?"

I always say, "I'll be better about 12:15."

JE: So did you write out that first sermon?

MB: I did, I did.

JE: He told you to write it and you wrote it out.

MB: Yes, I wrote it and did the best I could. It was terrible, it was terrible. I had not a clue. I had no library, of course, and I had a Bible, what we Methodists called my "third-grader Bible." We still present them here at Boston Avenue when our young people get to the third grade. We feel they're big enough now to really open *the* Bible and start seriously reading. I had my third-grader Bible. And on Saturday nights, I would sit at that little parsonage way out in the woods and turn the pages of my Bible and hope something would jump off the page. That's how bad it was.

I never contemplated suicide but I did look out the window at my car. I had to buy a car, I didn't have a car. I'd look at my car and wonder, *How far could I be from here by daylight in the morning?* I really thought, *If I just went to Tucumcari, New Mexico, and pumped gas the rest of my life no one would ever know what happened to me.* You know? That's how frightening it was. It was terrible, yeah.

JE: But as you look back, it was a great discipline?

MB: The people in the two little churches were wonderful. They could not have been more encouraging to me. They just kept encouraging, "Oh, you're getting better. Oh, you're getting better." You know? And I stayed there six years in those two little churches.

JE: While you were attending—

MB: Centenary First. I decided, *If this is the way I'm going to have to go to college, I'm going to get through.* So I went straight through the summers and I got my BA in three years. Then I needed to go to SMU for sure now to graduate school.

The two little churches begged the district superintendent, "Please, we'd rather have him just on the weekends than have somebody new."

By this time, Gayle and I had married. She and I drove to Dallas every Sunday night when I got through preaching. I was in class until Friday at noon. We drove back that 175 miles. I wrote a sermon on Saturday night and preached it Sunday morning. And wrote a sermon Sunday afternoon and preached it on Sunday night, and drove back to Dallas. [laughing]

JE: Gayle is thinking, *Is this my life?*

MB: You know, we couldn't even afford a radio in the cheap little car that we had. So Gayle saved up a little bit of saving money and bought a little wood recorder, sort of like a flute. She would take one of the hymnbooks, put it in the glove compartment of the car, and the all the way to Dallas on Sunday and all the way back Friday afternoon, she'd play hymns on this little recorder. You know, as we rode along. She paid the price so much as much as I did. And she had part-time jobs in Dallas that she could help out with my tuition and everything.

Chapter 06 – 10:45
Family Challenge

John Erling: How did you meet Gayle?

Mouzon Biggs: Well, strangely enough, Gayle, I tell everybody, she came looking for me. The treasurer of my church was a woman named Miss Mabel. She was a very active woman in Eastern Star, the women's part of Masonic Lodge. And Gayle's mother was very active in Eastern Star. They were members of another Methodist church about six miles away. And Miss Mabel told Gayle's mother, "We have a really good looking young preacher. You should have your daughter come over to church and take a look at him."

Gayle was in college and when she came home for Thanksgiving, her mother told her about me, you know, and said, "Miss Mabel would be thrilled if we were to show up over there."

I knew nothing of this. And that first Sunday morning that I rushed from the smaller church to preach at the bigger one, walked into the pulpit, there she was, sitting near the back with her mother. I thought she was the prettiest young woman I'd ever seen in my life. So I was determined to get to know her better. She was just in on college weekends and stuff.

We dated for a year and a half, once I got to meet her. And she kept saying, "I cannot be serious with you."

I said, "Why not?"

"Because you're a theology student."

I said, "I met you in church."

She said, "Oh, I believe in God but I'm not going to be a preacher's wife."

I asked her, "Why not?"

"Well, I don't sing well, I don't play the piano, I don't play the organ, I'd be mortified if somebody asked me to pray in public."

And I said, "What if I were to promise you you'd never have to do any of that?"

She said, "Really? And what would I do?"

I said, "Could you sit on the front row and root for me?" I remember and she remembers it too.

And she said, "Sure."

I said, "Then why don't we keep going and see how this works out?"

A year and a half later we were married, and in all of my churches I've said to people, "Gayle didn't feel called to be a minister. Gayle wanted to be my wife. So she doesn't want to be president of the United Methodist Women and she's not going to sing in the choir. I'll make the speeches and Gayle will be there every Sunday and root for me. I don't know

if you've ever noticed but Gayle sits on the front row and roots for me every Sunday." As our children grew up, they sat on the front row and rooted for me too, right with their mom.

JE: Your children, let's name them.

MB: Yes sir. Our oldest son is named Marvin Mouzon Biggs III, but we started calling him Trey when he was born and he still prefers to be called Trey. He lives right here in Tulsa and he's president of CFR Insurance. Graduated from SMU with a degree in economics.

Married a Tulsan young woman he had met in high school. She went to the University of Oklahoma and was graduated. They got married after both had finished college. They have three children.

Our youngest son is named Jason Paul Biggs. He was graduated from SMU with a degree in mathematics and premed. Came back to Oklahoma and went to the University of Oklahoma Medical School. Met his wife-to-be in medical school.

When they were graduated and they both ended up doing residencies a Parkland Hospital in Dallas, University of Texas program there. Five years, came back to Tulsa. Janet is a nephrologist at St. Johns Hospital and our son Jason is an anesthesiologist here in town and they have three little girls.

So we have two sons, two daughters-in-law, six little grandchildren, all involved at Boston Avenue Church. So that's about as good as it gets for us.

We did have a daughter also. When Gayle and I had been married six years and had no children, we were having trouble getting pregnant. We were told that maybe adoption would be the best way to go. And we adopted our first child, was a daughter named Allison. She was born at the Methodist Mission Home in San Antonio, Texas. Had a lot of problems, a lot of problems. By the time she was twelve, was slipping around at friends' houses and having a little alcohol. Later we found out a little marijuana, later became cocaine, later became crack cocaine. She died at thirty-one, she was out in California. Had been married and divorced twice, had no children.

Out in the Oakland, California area one night, got a mix of alcohol and drugs that stopped her heart. She died shortly before her thirty-second birthday.

But the two sons survived and they're here in Tulsa and wonderful. Never made any of those mistakes our daughter did, never.

JE: And that's a whole 'nother topic.

MB: It is.

JE: She was probably born with that gene. Do you believe?

MB: Yes I do now. Just to tell you briefly, there was a professor at University of Texas who resolved that he was going to spend his adult lifetime studying the old question of nature/nurture. He entered into an agreement with our Methodist Mission Home in San Antonio, that he would be told names of couples who had adopted children and if they chose to participate in his interviews they could.

We agreed to do that. We met him shortly after our Allison was born. As she grew a little bit more, a little bit more, he gave her eye-to-hand coordination tests, all kinds of things. He interviewed Gayle and me on different occasions.

Then after she was maybe five or six we didn't hear anymore from him. A few years ago, he suddenly called me out of the blue one day, I didn't even remember his name at that point. He told me who he was, that he was in his mid-sixties, he was about to finish his life's work and wondered if he could interview our Allison.

I told him she had died at thirty-one.

"Oh no, what happened?"

So we told him and he said, "I must fly to Tulsa and talk to you. Would you and Gayle be willing to talk to me a couple of hours?"

We said, "Sure."

Well, he talked to us for about four hours, asking questions, questions, questions. And finally he said, "I want to tell you something that you're not going to want to hear as a minister. Because I know you think anybody can be changed. But after studying this for more than forty years, I am convinced that some people are born not wired right. Sociopaths who have no sense of right and wrong, of people they're hurting and they don't care, they don't have a sense of delayed gratification at all. I believe some people are not wired right."

Our daughter was born in 1965, that was in the height of one of the drug epidemic in this country, the anti-Vietnam War protests and so on. The Home in San Antonio was very secretive back in those days, they promised young pregnant women, "If you will have your baby here and place it for adoption instead of abortion or something else, we will see to it that this child does not suddenly appear on your doorstep when he or she is twenty and you're remarried and have started your life over." They also said to adoptive parents, "If you adopt through this agency, when you've come to love this child more than your own life, you will not have a mother or father reclaiming the child."

So it was all very secretive, so we don't know the background that Allison. But this professor thinks that she could have had Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or could have been drug-addicted even before she was born. Not sure, but she never really bonded with anybody. There were a lot of problems, from the time she could talk almost, a habitual liar. Unlike any person I'd ever known in my life. I'd never known anybody like her in my life.

Gayle and I agonized, agonized over her for many, many years. And never were able to help her make the turn. Again, she was given every opportunity that our two sons were later as they came along. But they responded wonderfully well and she did not.

JE: So your life in the church, did she reject the church flat out from the beginning?

MB: No, no, I mean, it was a rule at our house, in the same way you don't get to vote on going to public school, you don't get to vote on going to church either. When you're an adult, you can reject anything you like. So she was baptized as an infant and grew up in the Sunday school and church, was confirmed, sang in our choirs here at the church and all. It was another life out there beyond the church.

JE: Yeah. Must have made you in your ministry sympathetic to the families who were going through this and in your counseling, it must have affected you.

MB: We had a retired bishop here at that time, Bishop Paul Galloway, a wonderful man that had grown up in an era when preachers admitted no fault, you know. Preachers didn't have problems, and if they did, they didn't talk about them.

And when Allison was sixteen, she went out the window of our upstairs parsonage, down a tree, and disappeared. We were already having counseling with her, had been for several years at that point. The counseling was helping Gayle and me but it wasn't helping Allison. It was helping us understand a little better as we went along what she was doing and why she was doing it. But she was not being turned at all.

The counselor had told us, "As you tighten more and more, she will either start to conform or she'll break and run."

She broke and ran. We did not know where she was and did not know for the next two years where she was. She had hitchhiked from here all the way to Colorado, a long, long story. It wasn't a boy thing for her, it was a drug thing. It was drugs and we were not going to tolerate them in our house.

Anyway, I talked with Bishop Galloway and poured out my heart and I said, "Bishop, I think this church needs to know what we're going through. Because they might find her out there in a ditch somewhere tomorrow." We didn't know for sure that she wasn't still in Tulsa or close by.

The counselor had told us, "If your church people jump on you for not being out there looking for her, you send them to me and I will read them the story of the Prodigal Son. Sometimes fathers and mothers have to wait. And this is your time, you have to wait and see if she'll come home."

And she didn't. Ever, never. We saw her more than two years later and we would go see her, with her permission we would come and see her from time to time. But she never, ever lived at home again. She was not willing to change her life enough to be a part of our family.

JE: So you'd see her in Tulsa, or somewhere other—

MB: No, in Denver. And then finally she had moved on to California from there.

Chapter 07 – 6:30
Religion on the Line

John Erling: I'm bringing you back to seminary.

Mouzon Biggs: Yes.

JE: You graduate from seminary.

MB: Yes.

JE: You have a master of theology of Southern Methodist University.

MB: Right, correct.

JE: Doctor of humane letters from Oklahoma City University.

MB: Right, and a doctor of divinity degree from Texas Wesleyan University in Ft. Worth. But when I was graduated, my bishop in the Houston area, sent me to be an associate at a big suburban church called Memorial Drive. I had two great years there.

JE: Suburban in?

MB: Houston. Out beyond River Oaks on the west side of Houston. I was ringing doorbells and we took in over thirteen hundred members in two years. So the bishop appointed me to First Methodist Houston, which was our largest in the denomination at that time, drawing bigger crowds than any other church at that time. I was the Sunday night preacher.

The famed author Dr. Charles L. Allen was the Sunday morning preacher. So for the next seven years I got to preach every Sunday night at that great church. That' where I learned how important television can be in a downtown church. We were on television live every Sunday on the ABC affiliate.

And then I got a call inviting me to moderate a call-in radio show on Sunday night, also at the big ABC radio station in Houston at the time, KXYZ, a big 50,000-watt station. After I would preach on Sunday nights, and rush Gayle and the children home, I would go over to KXYZ and at 9:30 I would moderate a full hour and a half live show called *Religion on the Line*. I gave my time, KXYZ gave its time. People could ask any question about religion they wanted to ask. It was during the Vietnam War. It was first human heart transplant, first time we landed men on the moon. It was a time when African Americans were bursting into predominantly white churches and demanding fifty million dollars in reparations. It was a turbulent time in the United States.

So it was a great time to be on radio, trying to answer people's questions. And I did that for seven years every Sunday night. Learned a lot about live radio at that point. I have great appreciation for people who do radio, like you did so well for so many years.

JE: Were you the single source on that program or did you have others who joined you as a panel?

MB: I was told by the station I could do it either way, and as I got more questions about: Well, what do the Presbyterians think? Or, What do the Muslims think? Or, What do the Jews

think about this? I called on people in Houston. I sometimes just had a name of somebody that I had admired from a distance. I got a rabbi, Jack Segal, who agreed to come give his time. When I would call him, I mean, I'd line him up weeks in advance, of course.

I found a Greek Orthodox, Father Nicholas Triantafillou who agreed to come. I found a Roman Catholic priest, Father Paul, and a couple of Protestants. But once I got over the fear that no one would call, in that big area people called. There was never a dead spot.

Once I discovered they would call, and I thought, *If I'm going to give my time, I'm going to get the most of this myself.* So I would do one Sunday night by myself, and then I'd have one of those guests. And then I'd do one Sunday night by myself, and then I'd have a guest.

JE: Was this your first time with a leader of the Jewish faith? What I'm leading to—

MB: Um-hmm (agreement).

JE: . . . is this where your interfaith work, which I want to talk a little about later—

MB: Okay.

JE: . . . was the seed planted there?

MB: No, not planted, but nurtured. When I got to Centenary College I decided I would be a history major. I was pre-theology, of course, but I still had to choose a major. And I chose history. I had really come to love the humanities by that time, so I had to take a good bit of psychology and philosophy. But I discovered Centenary had a terrific history department. Several really outstanding professors. And two of them were Jews; a husband and wife, both of whom had been professors at the University of Berlin. When Hitler came to power they were dismissed just because they were Jews. They were sent home, they were promised a meager stipend if they would keep their mouth shut. But they saw things getting worse and worse. And when the night of Kristallnacht occurred, they knew it was really bad now. Synagogues were burned and Jewish businesses broken into.

They had one young son, early teens, and they decided to spend whatever it took to escape from Nazi Germany. They were smuggled through Belgium to England, caught a ship from the port nearest London, Southampton, to New Orleans, Louisiana. They knew a Jewish family who had left Berlin and had gone to Shreveport, Louisiana. I don't know just why Shreveport, but that was case. And they wired ahead and said, "We've had to spend everything. We have enough for train tickets to Shreveport. If there's any way you could help us start over, we'd be grateful."

Well, this couple knew the president of our Centenary College and what a terrific Methodist school it is. Older than LSU, older than Tulane, it's the oldest continuous college in the state of Louisiana.

And when they got off the train with this young boy of theirs, the president of our Methodist college was standing there asking him, "Would you teach at Centenary College?"

When I had the two of them, I mean, think about it, this was the Cold War, this was the Cuban Missile Crisis. The husband, Dr. Bruno Strauss, had grown up a few miles from the Russian border. He taught a two-semester course in the history of Russia. They taught the history of Western civilization and so on. I mean, they were terrific. And every Friday night went to the Jewish synagogue.

In my little hometown, I knew no Jews. I'd not really heard Jews discussed. But I knew in my deepest heart, without anybody telling me, God has never revoked covenant with these people. Not ever. Their covenant is as valid as mine. I came to have genuine love and appreciation for the two of them. And I resolved that whatever I could do the rest of my ministry, I would foster dialog with the Jewish community wherever I was. I would do whatever I could to make that better. So that's where it began.

And then Rabbi Jack Segal helped me with that. He was terrific, really, really great. He was a young associate at the biggest synagogue in Houston. Very similar to me, you know, young wife, young children, facing a lot of the same things and working on staff of a huge synagogue as I was a church.

I've kept in touch with Jack all these years. He's retired now, I'm still working, but a great guy.

Chapter 08 – 8:43
Dr. Charles L. Allen

John Erling: Let me come back for just a little bit about—

Mouzon Biggs: Sure.

JE: . . . Reverend Allen.

MB: Yes.

JE: He was Dr. Allen, isn't he?

MB: Yes, Dr. Charles L. Allen.

JE: Tell us about him and his preaching style and the impact he may have had on your ministry.

MB: He had a great impact on me. I was eager to go there, frightened because I knew almost no one was coming to the downtown Sunday night service. Huge crowds in the morning, almost nobody at night—fewer than a hundred they were averaging. So that scared me, but I thought to get to work with a guy like Dr. Charles Allen would have to be wonderful. And for seven years, I sat right behind him, I was his liturgist. I heard him preach at 8:30 and 11:00 for seven years. So I watched, watched.

I have a very different style from his in some ways. He was a full manuscript preacher. Some people say, "Oh, I had him come to my church and he didn't use a note."

I said, "Well, those were the four sermons he could do if you woke him at three in the morning. I sat right behind him for seven years. I'm telling you, he used a full manuscript." And he did. He was a very effective full manuscript preacher.

I use no notes myself. I was pushed by a couple of professors to learn how to do preaching with no notes. Also, every Monday morning I go back to commentaries. I mean, I'm a lectionary preacher, so I very closely tie myself to the seasons of the church here. I mean, this coming Sunday is the third Sunday in Pentecost. And there are certain Scriptures that are most relevant to the third Sunday in Pentecost.

Dr. Allen preached topical, ten sermons on the Ten Commandments. A dozen sermons on the Beatitudes. Eight sermons on the Lord's Prayer, that sort of thing.

But also, when I start on Monday morning with a text I go straight to commentaries of the greatest scholars I know, both Jewish and Christian.

Dr. Allen, if he's going to preach on the Ten Commandments, he would go buy five or six books of sermons on the Ten Commandments and hear what Buttrick had said and what Ralph Sockman had said and what Harry Emerson Fosdick had said. Preachers.

I want to hear biblical scholars when I do my sermon work. So there are some differences.

He was from Georgia, he had a very heavy accent, Georgian accent, that people in Houston found hilarious. He could read the phone book and they would laugh. But he had a marvelous ability to make people laugh, and the next moment, he could take them down to dabbing at their eyes with their handkerchiefs. He was masterful.

I could not use humor, I discovered, it didn't work for me. I didn't tell jokes well like he did. But he told me himself one time, he said, "But you use pathos really well. Stick with what you do really well. Go with pathos when you have a really good story that moves people." He was wonderful to me, I could not have had anyone who would promote me more. He told me when he interviewed me with the bishop's permission, he was told he could take Gayle and me out to dinner and he and his wife did. And he said, "I cannot hit the ball for you. But I can put you up to bat."

And when he would get invitations, and he was getting more than he could fulfill, he would say to a Kiwanis Club or the Lions Club or the Rotary Club or the, you know, PTA banquet, "How about my man, Biggs?"

I was going day and night, day and night. I mean, it was tough on Gayle because here we had, by this time, three little children and I was going day and night much of the time. But I learned, I mean, I learned from all those experiences.

He had two sons and a daughter, but none of them had felt called to be a minister. And I think he really saw me as his preacher son.

When he died at ninety-two, his children asked that I come back, that I was his preacher son and that they wanted me to preach at his funeral. He was great to me. I never could repay what Charles Allen did for me.

JE: I'm going to spin off then since—

MB: Sure.

JE: . . . you talked about his style—

MB: Sure.

JE: . . . and your style of speaking and talk about that little bit. You're a storyteller.

MB: Yes.

JE: You just tell it. We have those who get in the pulpit and they're preachers, they're full of oratory. Did you struggle thinking that a preacher needed to be bombastic, have that kind of style? You just stand there and you're just telling it. Am I making myself clear here?

MB: Yes. I had several things factored in there. One was when I was driving into Shreveport to college every day from my little parsonage knowing I had another Sunday looming, I would ask myself, *Now what did I listen to all those years I was going to church, Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night? What did I listen to?* And I remember that if the preacher droned on and on about faith and hope and love, I was wondering what Mom had left cooking in the oven that was going to be ready for lunch when we all got home.

But if the preacher suddenly said, "You know, last Tuesday . . ." or "I ran a book last month," or "I saw a movie the other day," I was back, I was back. So I decided long ago, make a point and give the clearest meaning that you believe that has in Scripture and then illustrate. Point—illustrate, point—illustrate.

Because of our television here I have about twenty-five minutes to preach. I've discovered I can do four points, four illustrations in twenty-five minutes. So that's what I'm looking for. When I start with a new text on Monday morning, I'm looking for the four most important things I find. It just works for me, four, four, four, I can remember that.

I had a professor at Centenary, a woman named Dr. Ruth Alexander who was terrific. She taught speech and drama. She took a special interest in me and said, "If you're going to be a preacher I want you to learn to look people in the eye. If you're looking them in the eye you can tell if they're bored or confused or interested, whatever." And she said, "You look like you're talking to the whole audience but you aren't. Even in a new group you will discover in minutes, you have a half dozen," what she called "sympathetic faces." There are some people who frown when they're really concentrating. There are others who smile, who have a warm face, she called it. "Move to six different people and talk to them, keep talking to those five or six."

Then in seminary I had a professor at SMU, Dr. Bill Maculvaney, who ended up being president of St. Paul's Seminary in Kansas City. Maculvaney was teaching advanced

homiletics, it was called, it was a small class who wanted more work in preaching. And he said, "Every student in this class, this semester you will all preach one sermon with a full manuscript. You will preach one sermon with no more than three 3x5 cards. And you will preach one sermon with nothing in front of you but your Bible."

When I finished my third one near the end of the semester, he called each one of us in separately, and he said, "Well, your one without notes was by far your best."

And I said, "Well, that's because I spent three times as much time on it."

He said, "I don't care. I don't care what it cost you, I'm telling you, it's your style. Are you willing to pay the price to learn to do that or not?"

And I said, "I don't know."

He said, "All right, I've written down your grade so this has nothing to do with your grade, but I'm going to ask you to promise me you will give this a try for six months. Six months and then if you don't like it, go back to whatever style you want."

I made the promise because I had already heard my bishop say that he was going to send me to be an associate at this suburban church that didn't have a night service. So I figured, *I'm pretty safe. You know, I may get to preach once or twice in the next six months, that'll be it.*

Well, I got there and the senior minister said, "I'm leaving on vacation next week. You'll have the next three Sundays." And there were more people in that church than in my high school probably when I was student council president.

So the first Sunday morning, I've promised Maculvaney I'm going to preach without notes. I'm remembering everything Dr. Ruth Alexander told me. I'm in the men's room, down on my knees, throwing up. And the custodian came in and he said, "Mr. Biggs, what are we going to do?"

I said, "I've been here before, I'll be all right." And I washed my face and went in and preached. But I kept doing it until I learned how to do it without throwing up. I learned how to do it.

Charles Allen wrote his whole sermon in one day. He just said, "You're not going to see me Thursdays because I'm going to hole up in this study at my house and I'm just going to do a sermon.

Chapter 09 – 9:30
Sermon Preparation

Mouzon Biggs: But I discovered for me, my mind works better when I work two and a half or three hours and then sleep on it. So every morning here at Boston Avenue, two and a half hours. My secretary tries to protect me unless somebody's kid got hit by a school bus or something. Just says, "Can Dr. Biggs return your call at 11:30?" And most everybody is glad to do that.

So I'm just up here in my office by myself. If I can do two and a half hours Monday and two and a half hours Tuesday and two and a half hours Wednesday and Thursday and Friday, Friday noon I'm ready. I can really be family, you know, with Gayle or with children or grandchildren until about five o'clock Friday afternoon. About five o'clock Friday afternoon, as Ernest Hemmingway used to say, "It's the bull at five o'clock." For me it's the bull the next morning at 8:30 and I'm not good company. I need to be by myself.

I may have the football game going on television but I'm in a room by myself and I'm sitting there going, "Point one, illustrate. Point two, illustrate. Point three, illustrate." When I wake up the next morning when the alarm goes off I'm shaving and showering, "Point one, illustrate, point two, illustrate . . ."

In the sacristy, when I get here, I'm pacing with my robe on, my mic on, I'm ready. I'm pacing. And then I close up that manuscript in the briefcase and I go in and do it.

John Erling: So you have written it at one time?

MB: Oh, yes.

JE: So it has been written out?

MB: By Friday. But you know what? I'm a long-ago generation, I still write it on legal-size notepads. I still write it by hand. [laughs] You know?

JE: And because it is from memory it helps your style tell it. Is that the—

MB: Yeah.

JE: . . . reason? I mean, nobody would fault you because I've seen you preach many times and you don't even look down at anything.

MB: I don't. No.

JE: I mean, is there any notes on your pulpit at all?

MB: No, none.

JE: Have you ever been lost and wondered where you are and forgotten the third point?

MB: Once or twice but not in years and years. No, it doesn't happen to me. I am so focused by that time. You know, I may not could call the name of one of our grandchildren just before church because I am so focused at that point. I'm thinking of nothing else from about five o'clock Saturday. I mean, just trying to get it into my mind. I don't try to memorize word for

word. I'm not trying to memorize word for word but I'm thinking very clearly about the point. You know, the first point is all people sin, or something. Okay, but then what is the illustration?

And then the second point and illustration. At 8:30, frankly, I do the best I can but it's also a trial run. I'm getting the timing down and everything for the eleven o'clock service that's televised. Trying to get the timing down. And often I'm thinking, *Gee, I've got to cut three minutes. I've got to cut four minutes or something before the eleven o'clock service.* And I go teach Sunday school for an hour, but still in the back of my mind I'm working on it. And I'm getting a sip of water and I'm thinking, *I got to cut three minutes.*

But let me tell you one other quick thing. I had a number of different preaching professors. But for me, the most helpful person I ever had in the way I write a sermon was a high school literature teacher. Her name was Miss Lela Belle LaGrown. And in my senior year, she walked into our class and did sort of a *To Sir with Love* thing. She said, in this little East Texas oil town, "I'm assuming every one of you is going to college. So I'm going to teach you how to write a term paper."

She taught us how to start with a world of material and move to half that much material, and then a fourth of that much material. Every Monday morning I start with a lot of material. By Tuesday I have half that material. By Wednesday I'm down to a fourth of that material, just the best. Thursday, outline, Friday, find the best current illustrations I can find. I still do it the way Miss Lela Belle taught me.

One of my sons, not knowing that story, said to me years ago when he was in college, "Dad, how could you have ever chosen a job where you have to write a term paper every week and get up and give it to the class on Sunday?"

And I said, "Well, you know the right answer for that is I don't think I chose this job."

JE: Right. You're reminding me of my church in Grand Forks, North Dakota, Reverend A. A. Peterson and he was a great speaker, known for that. I'm probably about eight, nine years old, and he steps into the pulpit and he just confessed to the congregation that he did not have time to prepare a sermon that Sunday. "I've just been too busy."

MB: [laughing] Whoa.

JE: And I'm thinking, *This is great.* It was about twenty-five minutes till noon, *We're going to get out of here.* Don't you suppose he spoke till ten after noon?

MB: [laughing] Well, you know, even having said all that I have about how nervous and anxious I can be, I've put in my years as a Methodist preacher. Some years ago I could have retired. Gayle and I have managed our money very well; financially, I could have retired. I'm preaching because I love it. I believe what I do is important. I can hardly wait to get to my study on Monday morning.

A lot of preachers take Monday off, they say, "I'm exhausted."

No, no, I can hardly wait. If I didn't do as well the day before as I thought I should have done, I can hardly wait to get started. If I thought things went pretty well, I can hardly

wait to do that again. So Monday morning I'm ready to get my books out of my shelves here and start to work on next Sunday. The Monday through Friday is hard gut-wrenching sort of work. But Sunday morning, if it happens, it's wonderful, it's absolutely wonderful.

JE: Is it true you threw away thirty years of sermons?

MB: I did.

JE: Why?

MB: Gayle and I were moving from the parsonage. The parsonage was over forty years old and had a lot of problems. It was on a very valuable piece of real estate, so we decided the church could sell it and put the money into an endowment fund and pay us a housing allowance and let us buy our own house. We'd lived in that parsonage, at that point, twenty years when that happened.

And every night I would get home, Gayle would be sorting things to go to the Salvation Army or Goodwill. She'd say, "Can you live without this? Can you live without this?" And one night I got home and at the dinner table she said, "What are you going to do with that closet full of sermons?"

I've never repeated a sermon. Now if I go out and preach somewhere else I will, but not in my own church. Boston Avenue has not heard the same sermon twice in thirty-one years. I write a new sermon every week.

So here I had a closet filled with manila folders of sermons. And I said, "Can I think about that a while?" I mean, I just really hadn't thought about it.

And she said, "Sure." So she went on into another room and I sat down and I thought about it and thought about it and thought about it. Finally, I went in and picked up box after box after box and carried them out to the curb. The next morning when I went out to get the paper, they were gone.

Because this is the truth, John, there are very few Charles L. Allens who can write sermons in a way that other people will buy them. There are a few, not many of us. In the same way that most of the organists who do great work in our churches, like here at Boston Avenue, Fred Elder, thirty-six years and now the Pensaras have given us eleven terrific years. Those musicians play preludes and offertories and postludes and hymns and they offer up the best they've got. And it either happens or it doesn't. And the next Sunday they play again.

And that's true of preaching. For most of us, you work hard on it, you give it the best you got, you entrust your best effort to God and it either happens for those who hear it or it doesn't happen and it's gone. It's like stepping into a river, different river next Sunday, the water's still moving. And I felt that symbolically that said how I really understand preaching.

So over thirty years of sermons went in the Tulsa garbage the next morning. And since then I keep two years at all times, in case I'm invited to speak somewhere else. I look

through and I pick out four or five or three, however many they want me to do at some place. But when it gets to be three years old it goes to the trash. Ever since.

JE: Have you ever delivered a sermon and you think, *That just went flat,* and the reaction you got to it was surprising.

MB: Yes.

JE: How much they accepted it. "That was really good, Dr. Biggs."

MB: Yes. It does happen to me and most of the time I think I can tell because I am looking into people's faces. I can tell if it's working or not. It doesn't mean I can tell about every individual in my congregation, but, again, I still find sympathetic faces that I'm talking to. So I can tell those people are really interested or they're not as interested and I'm frantically trying to make it interesting. Yes, that has happened when I felt, *Gee, that didn't quite happen.*

And there will be people who will say, "Gee, that's the best you've done in six months."

And that's always so frustrating because I think I'm reading them pretty well and maybe I'm not.

Chapter 10 – 2:30
Beaumont, Texas

John Erling: So you leave Houston and you become the senior minister at Beaumont, Texas?

Mouzon Biggs: Correct.

JE: What was the name of that church?

MB: Trinity United Methodist Church. A former pastor here, Bishop Paul Galloway, whom I mentioned a little earlier, had become my bishop in Texas. Bishop Galloway took a bold step. District superintendents thought I was far too young for a church of over two thousand members to be the senior paster—

JE: And you—

MB: . . . and he overrode them.

JE: Your age at that time?

MB: I was thirty-two.

JE: So your age was thirty-two years old and—

MB: Yeah.

JE: . . . some thought you were too young?

MB: Yeah. See, by going straight through college, you know, in three years, and then graduate school three more years, and then starting to preach, I was fully ordained at twenty-four year of age and preaching.

So eight years later, Bishop Galloway appointed me to be senior pastor of the best suburban church in Beaumont, Texas.

JE: Did that work against you, your youth? There were people in the church who did think you were too young?

MB: No, no, the church people did not, just the leadership. The district superintendent there welcomed me with open arms. It was the other district superintendent who said, "He's too young."

And Bishop Galloway told me, he said, "You need to know, son, eleven out of the twelve voted against you. They say you're too young and too inexperienced to pastor a church of that size. They say, 'Okay, he can preach, we saw he could do that at First Methodist on Sunday nights. But Charles Allen's carrying the big load of administration and raising a budget and all that sort of thing, supervising a staff. He's too young.'"

And Bishop Galloway said, "I want you to get over there and show them I know what I'm doing. I have decided today to be a bishop. I've overridden eleven of my twelve district superintendents." But then he said something else to me that day, he said, "And if you do it well for six or seven years your next stop could be Boston Avenue Tulsa."

He had pastored here ten years. He loved this church better than any in America. I'd never seen the church. I knew about it, of course, and I knew when he said that he was going to have to retire before I got there, which was true. But guess what? He was succeeded by another former pastor here, Finis Crutchfield. And he told Crutchfield about me before he ever got there.

And Crutchfield decided, "Waa (hesitating sound), maybe this guy is a match for Boston Avenue."

So when my predecessor here got elected a bishop in 1980, I did not know that those two bishops had been leaning on the Oklahoma bishop to say, "If that church comes open we got a guy in Texas that'll fit that church."

Bishop Millhouse called and asked me to come. I was thirty-nine by that time.

Chapter 11 – 6:55
Boston Avenue Methodist Church

Mouzon Biggs: You probably know this story, John, but the Methodist church split at the time of the Civil War, north and south. But Oklahoma, of course, was not a state, it was Indian Territory. So the northern Methodist sent a missionary down to form a church before Tulsa was a town; it was just a little trading post on the bank of the Arkansas River in Indian Territory. And it became First Methodist Tulsa.

The southern branch sent a missionary, young preacher, young wife, baby in a homemade crib, in a covered wagon and he founded the Methodist Episcopal Church South. He first started with a little brush arbor kind of thing he built down on the bank of the river. Then eventually they built a little wooden church, and then they built a brick church at 5th and Boston, and it became the Boston Avenue church.

Later, when they thought they needed to move a little bit south where they could perhaps buy some more property for parking as automobiles came along, they just moved down the street from 5th Street to 13th and built this one. So just location determined the name.

John Erling: You said First Methodist though.

MB: Yeah. *The* First Methodist over there.

JE: *The* First Methodist?

MB: Called themselves the First Methodist Church. Yes, it took the Methodists though eighty years to get over the Civil War and reunite. And by that time, First Methodist and Boston Avenue were both large enough they didn't want to become one. So we have two Methodist churches four blocks apart.

JE: We should mention in Beaumont—

MB: Yes.

JE: . . . you started a TV ministry there.

MB: I did.

JE: So you brought that experience to Tulsa.

MB: I did. I saw again what the television ministry had meant to us in Houston, so as soon as I could start getting the money together I convinced that congregation that was the thing to do. And that church is still on television, forty years later. Has been all these years.

And when I came here, then I approached this congregation, one of my very first meetings about our being on television here.

JE: And now you're streaming on the internet.

MB: We are.

JE: Your service.

MB: Yeah. That doesn't draw, so far, nearly the audience that channel 8 does for us.

JE: Some observations either of Tulsa, of the church, are they vastly different as we look back here in 2011? It's thirty-one years you've been here. Are there some observations you could make?

MB: We love Tulsa, first off. Let me say, we love Tulsa better than any other place we've ever lived and expect to spend the rest of our lives here. When our two sons went south to SMU, Trey, our older son, was recruited out of SMU by Chub Insurance and so he and Allison were married, but first lived in Dallas.

Jason came back to go to OU Med School but then went back to Dallas for residency and hospitals in Dallas were offering him and his wife wonderful opportunities down there.

We weren't sure if either of the sons would actually come back here to live. But both decided they love Tulsa and their wives are both Oklahomans and they love Tulsa. So we were thrilled when they came back because Gayle and I certainly love it.

I do feel that Tulsa turned down several important bond issues back there that could have benefited our downtown. I was on the board of Downtown Tulsa Unlimited for twenty-five years. I struggled with mayor after mayor. You know, it takes four or five years to work up one of those proposals and then defeated. Four or five years, defeated.

At that point, Oklahoma City started sprinting past Tulsa, I think. They made a lot of good decisions. Tulsa made a lot of very poor decisions. When we finally were able to pass Vision 2025, look how it's revitalized our downtown. Now I think our new superintendent of schools has done a tremendous job in trying to get Tulsa public schools in check and really help those schools move forward.

I just heard him speak today at noon, the superintendent of schools. And he said 85 percent of the students attending Tulsa public schools are living below the poverty level. That's almost unimaginable to me.

Both of my boy went through Tulsa public schools and did very well. They both did very well a SMU and I want so much for our Tulsa public schools to do well. So seeing that they seemed to have turned a corner, I think our downtown has definitely turned a corner, but, of course, there will be other opportunities. Either Tulsa moves forward or we take a step backward at some point.

JE: How about Boston Avenue? Is there a makeup of the church looks different today than it did thirty-one years ago?

MB: Yes. When I came here our church had Fred Jones Ford on three sides of us. The first time I saw the church, the night we moved from Beaumont was the first time I had ever seen the church. And I thought, *Oh, gee, there's no parking.* They had a little bit on the south side but Fred Jones was on our west side with new cars and service department. They had a huge parts distribution building on the north of us, and all the way down Cincinnati on our east, used cars.

But we started building an endowment fund, trying to be sure we could keep up our beautiful building. And as that endowment fund continued to grow we were finally able to buy out Fred Jones Ford and convert all of that space into beautiful landscaped parking. So that helped us a great deal.

Every time we build a new freeway here or extend a freeway, even the Creek Bypass, if you make it easier for people to move, they will move. And as the downtown suffered, we suffered. In that big oil bust of the 1980s when there was so much property downtown,

all the downtown churches tried to expand their properties and so on, that affected Boston Avenue too. And we've worked really, really hard to try to draw young families into the downtown.

But I think one of the biggest things all of our clergy are seeing is that we have a very different generation now from the World War II generation. The World War II generation, my mother and father and so many others, believed you go to church every Sunday. Every Sunday church, every Sunday Sunday school. We have a generation, or two or three right now, who will tell you they're very active in church and you see them once a month or once every six weeks. They have so many more options. "Well, there's a football game this weekend." "There's a gymnastics tournament next weekend." "There's soccer." Then there's softball, you know. It's just unbelievable how many different things people choose to do, and yet they think they're really active in the church.

But it's hard to sustain Sunday school classes and choirs and things when you see somebody once a month or once every five or six weeks. So I think we're all struggling with that. It doesn't mean that we don't have some people who still come every week. And they're the kind of people you can really build Sunday school classes and Bible studies and choirs and so on around.

But I wish we had more of the temperament of the World War II generation. Tom Brokaw was right, they were a great, great group of people.

Chapter 12 – 8:30
Church Attendance

John Erling: Why do you think these generations have drifted in their attitude about the church?

Mouzon Biggs: I don't have a great answer for that. Again, I think a part of it is they have more options. They have more money, I think, in many ways. People who grew up in the Great Depression were forever affected by that. My parents were forever affected by the fact that they grew up in the Great Depression. They knew what it was like to be hungry and not to have enough.

Last night when I went to bed I thanked God for an air-conditioned house. Because I remember what it was like in the hot summertime when we had no air-conditioning. I'm grateful for an air-conditioned house. I'm grateful for a house that's warm in the wintertime.

We have a generation now that takes that for granted. They've always had air-conditioning and they've always had a heated house in the winter. You know, I grew up

when you got an apple when it was apple season. Now you can have an apple every day; they bring them from wherever they need to. You can buy apples any day. Strawberries any day. There's nothing seasonal anymore, per se, you can have whatever you want when you want it, by and large.

I saw in a recent Gallup poll, 92 percent of Americans supposedly still say they believe in God, and many of them would say, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious."

I think it's a much tougher situation.

Another thing, when I was doing evangelism in Houston right out of seminary, the neighborhood where I was sent, you could still walk up to a house, ring a doorbell, and people would invite you in. Now I have a really difficult time getting people to answer the phone. They all have Caller ID and if they don't want to talk to you they don't pick up the phone. Or they don't want to talk, they want you to text them or something else, you know.

Also, when I got a commitment, back down there I'd get a commitment, "Yes, we're ready to join," I got a husband and a wife and four teenage kids, I got six new members. We had four people join Boston Avenue the other day and they were four singles. Now that's wonderful, I mean, I'm glad to have them, but in the old days, if I got four commitments I'd have twenty new members, not four. So it's a very different world. A lot more single parents, a lot more single adults choosing to wait until later to get married and so on. So that makes it different.

JE: Yeah, yeah. And the church is trying different ways to interest people. Like today we have traditional services and we have contemporary services.

MB: Yeah.

JE: Boston Avenue, do you have a contemporary service?

MB: We do not.

JE: You've chosen not to go that route. Many churches, of course, have media enhancements, screens used in many churches, and you do not.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative). We do not.

JE: So that's a conscious decision on your part.

MB: It is.

JE: Why have you made that decision? And do you think you could be losing out because others are using these modern day conveniences?

MB: We could be, only time will tell for sure. My feeling has been that there are enough churches in Tulsa and enough Methodist churches in Tulsa that people can choose. And that we would try to be the church for people who wanted to worship, for lack of a better word, traditionally.

When I came here and saw the other Methodist churches in Tulsa, which I had never known before, I decided we would be the one that would reclaim our Anglican roots, that we would move more in that direction. Boston Avenue was not having choirs, per se,

when I arrived. We started that. Ministers weren't wearing stoles to go with the seasons of the year. We started that. We had to buy stoles.

My predecessors were not lectionary preachers that put a great deal of emphasis on whether its Advent or Christmas tide or Epiphany or Lent or whatever. I think that's very important. And I believe it's not so important that I preach my favorite text but that I preach God's whole story. So the lectionary is a way to do that, so that I preach not only from Genesis but I preach from texts in Revelation that aren't my favorite. But it's a part of God's Book, so what can I say about that and still be faithful to the Book?

So far, you know, I'm close enough to the end of the road now that I'm not going to have to make that decision really. I have made it for the rest of my ministry. What Boston Avenue will do next, I couldn't tell you for sure.

JE: Because as we're talking now in 2011, and we expect ten, twenty-five, fifty years they can still listen to this because of our technology.

MB: Right.

JE: And so we should say, and then today we have satellite churches, people gather for a live feed from a main church sanctuary.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Or maybe a recorded sermon. Churches have built out space in shopping malls.

MB: Right.

JE: So from your days of ministry, even coming here to Tulsa, all of this has happened in the last thirty years, with what I'm talking about.

MB: Yes.

JE: I don't know what I'd call it, you would be the one to call this, there's a change from this traditional way of preaching, which is very much apparent here in Boston Avenue.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: And so when you see all this going on out there, you say, "Well, that's interesting, that's good, they're getting people that maybe we can't get."

MB: Correct. Again, when I was with Dr. Charles L. Allen in Houston all those years ago, he said, "Thank God for the Episcopalians, they draw people that no one else is drawing. Thank God for the Assemblies of God, they draw people that others are not drawing." He said, "In little towns," back in those days, "people differentiate themselves by denomination. But in big cities, even United Methodist can differentiate themselves."

So we don't have to be a clone of First Methodist, nor they of us. Nor Asbury, nor Christ, nor St. James, nor any of these others. People have a choice to make and as long as we're all being as faithful to God's Book as we know how and to God as we know God, then how that message is presented, you know, I think people do have different tastes and they do have different things that appeal to them.

People who come to Boston Avenue now, our greatest window into their homes and their lives—channel 8, it's number one. Because I make the calls myself. Channel 8 is the way. When they see us on channel 8 they either decide, *This is the way I like to do it* or, *It's not the way I like to do it*. When they come down here they've already pretty much made a decision, *This is the way I like to worship*.

Also, people move here from other places and often their pastor will tell them before they ever get here, based on what that pastor does, "Well, you're going to really want to go to St. James," or, "You're going to want to Will Rogers United Methodist," or, "You're going to be happy at Boston Avenue."

We had a new family last Sunday from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I know their pastor well and he told them, "Of the churches in Tulsa, you're going to be at home at Boston Avenue."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

MB: And I appreciate that. But there are other pastors who send their people to other churches—

JE: Sure.

MB: . . . because they know they approach things differently.

JE: Right. And even in your thirty years here, our dress in church has changed.

MB: Oh, indeed.

JE: A more casual dress. As I grew up and I still do, a suit and tie—

MB: Yeah.

JE: . . . is what I'd wear to church.

MB: Yeah.

JE: And now that's different.

MB: Well, when we got married, you know, as little money as we had, Gayle wore hats to church. All the women wore hats to church when we got married, and certainly women wore dresses. Now I go to meetings where United Methodist bishops, women bishops, are wearing pantsuits. And we see worshipers, of course, wear pantsuits often and they're certainly welcome here.

We see our Secretary of State Hilary Clinton wearing nothing but pantsuits these days. So yes, dress has changed dramatically.

There are pastors in Tulsa who choose to wear slacks and shirt or Dockers and knit shirts to work every day. I wear a white shirt six days a week. I shine my shoes, I wear suits. I don't wear sport coats even to work, I wear suits, because I think that's important in the way when I go see a doctor I expect her or him to look like a doctor in that sense. I feel more comfortable when they look like a doctor. Even though there are days when I certainly could dress more casually, that may be a day too when I hear that someone has just been killed in a car wreck and need me immediately or something. And when I get there, I want to look like their pastor, as I understand that role.

Chapter 13 – 8:22
Respect for Jews

John Erling: Do you think more people coming to church now are just looking for a good sermon or a deeper experience with a community of believers? Which is it?

Mouzon Biggs: I would be fooling myself if I didn't admit that there are a lot of people who come to Boston Avenue, a church this size, because they're not looking for a friend. They come in and they slip out the back door. They enjoy being almost anonymous here. There are people whom I recognize sometimes in the service who do not register in when we have registration. They don't want to register in, they don't want to give a phone number, they don't want to have me call them. And, you know, I respect that, if that's what they choose to do.

So there are people who are lonely and are looking for a Sunday school class, a Bible study group, an aerobic dance group or something. But there are others who are not, who enjoy coming to church and are fed and blessed and they slip out the back door and go home again.

JE: The greatest challenge as a minister in a church like Boston Avenue, most see you behind the pulpit.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: That is probably your smallest challenge? Is managing a church a difficult challenge?

MB: No, the biggest job I have is preaching. I believe the biggest job I have is preaching. Because if people come to church they will join—a certain number of them will join and a certain number of them will give and be generous. If people aren't coming they aren't joining and they aren't being generous. So you need administrative skills for sure. You have to make those tough decisions from time to time.

One other thing I decided about ministry too though, John, when I grew up near a small town all the preachers were on 24/7, as doctors were. When I got to Houston and was on a big church staff, even back then, we could put a beeper on one guy and everybody else could have the Fourth of July off. And I loved that.

I told Gayle just a few weeks after we got to that church, "Gayle, if the bishop never lets me pastor a church like this, I'd rather be number two or three on a big church staff than to go back to a small town like the one where I grew up." Because I really love the specialization. I mean, I've got a minister here who works with newborns to kindergarten, who really understands early childhood development. I've got a minister here that starts with the first grade through the fifth grade, who really understands those elementary years. I've got a director of middle school youth who loves sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders. I've got a woman working with senior highs who is the best I've ever had in that position. They are specialists.

I have a minister of young adult education. I have a minister of older adult education. I have an administrator here who has an MBA from SMU. I can specialize here and I loved it. From the time I got to be a part of a multiple staff, I knew right away this was going to be my home. Either as an associate pastor or prayerfully, hopefully I was going to be a senior pastor again someday.

So I've loved it. That's a big part of the pleasure of my job too is that I can really focus on what I chose to major in in seminary. You have core courses in seminary, but then you can specialize. And I took everything I could get in Bible studies and preaching. That was my great love. Still is.

JE: Is there a favorite part of the Bible as a text for preaching?

MB: Well, I think for Christians the four Gospels certainly can give me that much material. I'd say the four Gospels. But I really love preaching from the *Torah*: Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy, in particular. I love the lectionary because it makes me be versatile, makes me deal with all sixty-six books at some time or other.

JE: You were past president of the National Conference for Community and Justice, also known as the National Conference for Christians and Jews.

MB: Right.

JE: So when the seed was planted that bore fruition in Beaumont, Texas, too probably?

MB: Yes.

JE: And then definitely here in Tulsa.

MB: Right.

JE: And that's important to you, why, to continue that?

MB: Very much. First of all, I believe God honors the covenant he made with Jews. As surely as he honors the covenant he made with Christians. And that I'm to honor that covenant as well. But I also have found that some of my dearest friends, I mean that sincerely, are members of the Jewish community. Rabbi Charles and Nancy Sherman I know even better than I know the Fitzermons, though I'm very fond of them as well. But Charles and Nancy are really dear friends to Gayle and me. They invited us into their home for Passover some years ago.

This year on Good Friday, when I was just, you know, exhausted with all that happens in Christian churches during Holy Week, Gayle and I ate at Utica Square that night. And as we got out of the restaurant a little bit early, she said, "Why don't we go to the temple?"

And I said, "Why don't we?"

We pulled into the parking lot and we went in and worshiped with Temple Israel on Good Friday night, a part of their Passover. They are very special people. I feel my life has been so enriched by knowing, knowing well members of the Jewish community. In every place I've lived since college I have made it a real purpose to get to know Jews better.

Gayle and I want to know the sufferings, I mean, to feel in the gut the sufferings too. We have spent vacations visiting holocaust sites. She and I have been to eight concentration camps now. And in every one of those it's a heartrending, moving experience. Because I want to feel. I believe I know Jesus better when I know Jews better. He was nothing but a Jew and if I'm going to understand him better, I've got to understand his people better, his cousins.

And again, if I had a deep personal problem, of all the clergy in Tulsa, Oklahoma, I'd probably call Rabbi Sherman first.

JE: Hmm (thoughtful sound).

MB: That's how much he means to me.

JE: Through this website I have interviewed a number of Jews and I have been so taken with their spirit. As they say, "repair the world."

MB: Right.

JE: Their willingness to go out of their way to help. I grew up in the Christian church, of course, and I just didn't hear the kind of talk in my Christian church that I heard from these people that I've interviewed.

MB: Yeah. You know, we can learn much. After I came to Boston Avenue one of the things I did, we have an endowed speaker series every year. I noticed that they had never had a rabbi. When I asked the committee they looked as if no one had ever mentioned that to them before. And I said, "Have you ever heard a great rabbi preach?"

"Well, no."

And I said, "Would you be willing to try a great rabbi in our series here?"

And they said, "If you think so, sure."

So I talked to my friend Charles Sherman. I said, "I've got to have the best, Charles, you tell me who's the best."

Well, he recommended a rabbi out of Chicago, Rabbi Herman Shawman. I did not know him at all. I wrote to him and told him what we were trying to do. And I said, "Now I don't want you to try to convince us that Jesus was not the Messiah. And we are not going to try to convince you that he was. I want you to preach the four greatest sermons you have ever written in your life. And I believe by Tuesday night my people will know you're talking about the same God they worship every Sunday."

He wrote back and said, "I can do that."

And it was terrific. So four or five years later, we had another rabbi, and four or five years later, we had another rabbi. Now they say, "Well, when can we have another rabbi?" Because they've all been so terrific, you know. And they have come knowing that we have no desire to try to proselytize them. And they don't come trying to proselytize us. We honor each other's covenant and believe that we're talking about and worshiping the same God.

Chapter 14 – 5:52
Jews, Muslims, Christians

Mouzon Biggs: So on my twentieth anniversary here my congregation, without my knowing, decided to solicit special gifts and put statuary here on the church grounds that of all the things they appreciated, they wanted to celebrate my work with other faith communities here in Tulsa. So that statue has a Jewish boy and a Muslim boy and a Christian girl almost in a circular dance, and a Scripture that Rabbi Sherman uses often about what a joyous thing it is when people live together in unity. That bronze sculpture is on our grounds here and they take great pride in that.

And our congregation believes with all their hearts that what I've tried to convince them, you don't have to water down your faith to be in conversation with Jews or Muslims. In fact, in all the work I've done through the last forty-five years, when we come to the table we need the best Jew in the city. We need the best Muslim in the city. We need the best Christian in the city sitting at the table to talk with each other. And that's what I try to be when I sit with them. The best I know how to be.

John Erling: The Christian church at large though is about proselytizing and the Jews don't do that.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: In fact, I was told a rabbi must say no three times to someone who wants to become a Jew.

MB: Right.

JE: And I have a Jewish friend who said to me the other day that actually the Christians had done a lousy job of converting. [laughs] But here at this church at Boston Avenue you don't feel that compulsion to do that.

MB: Not at all. In fact, we have several couples here where either husband or wife is Christian and the other spouse is a Jew. And in each case I've said to the Jewish spouse, "I want you to know you are welcome here any time. And I promise as long as I'm the pastor here you will never feel uncomfortable here, you will never be embarrassed here. I believe you will feel at home here, appreciated here." As far as I know that's proven to be the case.

In the old days when we were trying so hard to work for women's rights, you remember how much it meant when we would call a physician, you know, with a feminine pronoun. There are few things that if you're sincere and you say them the Jewish community picks up right away that you're sensitive.

For example, I no longer say BC and AD when I mention dates. Just by saying a date before the common era or of the common era means the world to them. To say the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures means the world to them, rather than one being Old and one being New. You see, there are ways to communicate that one accepts

the other and one appreciates, has genuine appreciation for the other, they pick up on those subtleties that other people may not.

JE: My Jewish friend said they believe the mountain is here and up the mountain are these many different paths.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: But they eventually lead to the top of the mountain.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: So he's saying to me then that you can take a different religious path and reach that mountain. Do you believe that?

MB: For me, of course, there can be only one way for me. By that I mean I do believe God has revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth in a way he never did in any other person. But I can say that and know that as long as I live I will be a Christian and I will try to help other people become Christian, but not those whom I believe have a valid covenant with God. I'm not saying any and every religion is going up the same mountain. But I believe that Jews and Muslims are talking about the same God. We're not identical because the Jews believe the clearest revealer of God ever was Moses. Not that God was present in him the way we Christians believe he was present in Jesus of Nazareth. But Moses is the central player in the *Torah*, second to God, of course. But of humans, Moses is the number one player.

For Muslims, it's Mohammed the Prophet. For us Christians, it's Mary's child Jesus. It does make a difference in the way we conduct ourselves and the way we behave. Still the best of those three faith traditions do honor each other and do work for good in the community.

I mean, there are a lot of differences between Mormons, Latter Day Saints, and me. But the Latter Day Saints whom I know are really good community citizens. Really do a lot of good work in the community. And so even though they believe some things in the *Book of Mormon* that I would find impossible to believe, for me. The One whom I follow says, "By their fruits you shall know them." And when they're bearing good fruits I celebrate that fact.

JE: Yeah. I'll never forget Billy Graham was on *Larry King* one night, and Larry King, who was a Jew—

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . was asking lots of questions: Well, who's going to go to heaven? Who's going to do this? And finally, Billy just said, "Larry, there are some things I just don't know."

MB: Right.

JE: And we have to give it up.

MB: That's right.

JE: Believe in our own faith—

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: . . . and we just don't know, we won't know till later.

MB: Right.

Chapter 15 – 2:20
Oral Roberts

John Erling: Speaking of Billy Graham, Oral Roberts comes to mind. And he became a member of Boston Avenue.

Mouzon Biggs: He did.

JE: In the '70s?

MB: Actually I think late '60s perhaps. I think it was when Finis Crutchfield was still pastor here and he was elected a bishop in '72. So I think it was late '60s probably. But he and Evelyn were members here when I first arrived. They were here my very first Sunday, sitting right out in front of me in the congregation there.

I felt that I came to know them very well. On the night that one of their sons died I called and talked to Richard and told him that I knew they'd be getting phone calls from all over the world, but would he please just be sure that his mother and father knew that I had called. And if there was any way I could help, let me know.

He said he would. That was six o'clock or something that evening when I had first heard it on the news. I was home all evening. I finally had brushed my teeth and had my pajamas on, ready to go to bed, and the phone rang. It was Richard saying, "Everything's quieted down now. My mother and father wondered if you would come."

I said, "Sure," and so I redressed and hurried out to their home. And felt that for another hour and a half or so that night I was their pastor.

Now in the service, the funeral, they turned more to the connections they had from other parts of the world and so on. I was present but I wasn't a participant in leading the service. But I felt I got to know both of them fairly well for a few years.

And then when a Methodist preacher—not here but in Oklahoma—pressed our judicial council to rule at one point whether Oral Roberts was really a Methodist preacher or not. And they ruled he was not.

He was hurt and embarrassed by that. We talked about it. He knew I had nothing to do with that. He said, "I'm an embarrassment to the Methodist church and I'll go back to my own people." The Holiness people, you know.

So I was sad about that. But whenever I saw him after that he was always very friendly to Gayle and me and would give us a hug. He knew that I had genuine appreciation for all the good that he had done.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

MB: I did. Yeah.

JE: And in the interview that I did with Oral—

MB: Yeah.

JE: . . . elsewhere in this website, he spoke very openly about the death of Ronny.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative). He—

JE: And how he had overdosed and he was very forthright and open about it, as you were about your daughter.

Chapter 16 – 4:32
Issues Facing the Church

John Erling: There are issues facing the church at large today that perhaps weren't facing you as you really got into ministry. We have terrorism, we have same sex marriage, we have the AIDS pandemic, gender roles in the church, biblical literacy in the church. I was reading where the most widely known Bible verse among adults and teen believers is "God helps those who help themselves," which is not actually in the Bible.

Mouzon Biggs: [laughing] No.

JE: Perhaps conflicts with the basic message of Scripture. So all of these that are facing the church today that are difficult, I don't know if you can project twenty-five years, fifty years from now, I mean, how they're dealing with all this? It's something you face here at the church? Some of these topics that I've talked about. People certainly want to ask you questions about them.

MB: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: If you speak about them from the pulpit or how do you deal with some of these very sensitive issues?

MB: First of all, I never get into politics. One of my professors said, "You preach the Bible, but the way it was really put together." I had wonderful professors who really helped me understand the Bible. I know Moses didn't write the first five books. I know that everybody who wrote in the Bible thought the earth was flat. I mean, they were very limited in the things they knew. The Bible is about how people came to understand God. Not how the world was created. Genesis 1 is not about *how* it was created, it's about *who* created it.

So anyway, he kept saying, "Preach the Bible the way you know it was written, by whom it was written when we can know by whom, and under what circumstances and so on. But don't go too specific in your telling people what to do. Leave room for the Holy Spirit to guide them. Leave room for the Holy Spirit."

So my people, being as conservative a part of the country as Tulsa is, I would be considered very liberal to many on the way I understand the Bible to have been put together, in the way I treat Jews and Muslims at our church here. But I think I've been

able to hold on to a lot of people because I don't tell them how to vote. And I don't get into political issues.

When it comes to something as volatile as homosexuality the Methodist church has only one body that speaks for it, and that's the General Conference. Duly elected delegates, based on the number of members from all over the world. The Methodist church has chosen so far, the majority of delegates present and voting, to say homosexuality is not to be condoned because of Scripture. But the Methodist church has also said, and it's in our *Book of Discipline*, "Every person is a child of God and worthy of the ministries of the church."

So at Boston Avenue I do the best I know how to let every person and any person know he or she is welcome here. We actively call on people that twelve and twelve, people who are mentally limited, who are mentally ill at times. In the same way that when people show up and you can tell that they're companions to each other, both two males or two females, we trust that we do not judge them here at Boston Avenue. They are children of God and worthy of every ministry that we do and are a vitally important part of our ministry.

When it comes to same sex unions the Methodist church has said you will not perform them. And I am an ordained United Methodist minister, I do what the Discipline of the church tells me to do and I don't do what it tells me not to do as an ordained minister of the church. But then it also tells me that every person is a child of God and worthy of every ministry of the church. And I try to be sure that every person knows they're welcome at Boston Avenue church, they are very welcome here.

We have a man who comes almost every Sunday and he stands around and talks to himself and mumbles quietly, but I see people walk by and pat him on the shoulder or speak to him. And you know, sometimes he doesn't even seem to be aware that anybody is there. They treat him well here, they treat him very well here, even though they know that he's mentally ill and very limited.

Anyway, I've tried really hard in my thirty-one years to help anybody and everybody know that they will be welcome here and they'll be treated here with honor and with dignity.

Chapter 17 – 7:09
Church Architect

John Erling: About the building itself—
Mouzon Biggs: Yes.

JE: . . . Boston Avenue as a building, a landmark for Tulsa. Constructed in the '20s, during the Art Deco boom. A little background? The architect, his name?

MB: Our church is convinced it was Dr. Ada Robinson. Our church is convinced everything that you read here, John, says Dr. Ada Robinson. I've got her biography right there on my desk. She was an art teacher at the University of Tulsa, a Quaker. When the building committee let it be known that they wanted to take proposals from some of the leading architectural firms in the country, all the drawings came in, they thought they looked like everybody else's church. *Tulsa World* said, "Boston Avenue Rejects Architect's Rendering."

Dr. Ada Robinson called the committee church—this is all in the minutes of the meetings. His name was Christopher Columbus Cole. Mr. and Mrs. Cole chaired that committee, and to humor her, they said, "Okay, bring your drawing."

And when she brought it to the next meeting, they said, "We want to build that." So they hired engineering firms to build in all the stresses and strains. But we have original drawings by Dr. Ada Robison.

Later, a student of hers became a very prominent architect named Bruce Goff. And he convinced all of his students who went to classes at the University of Oklahoma that all the work was his and she took the credit.

Our church believes all the creative work was hers and he took the credit. So you won't see Bruce Goff's name in the church. You hear other architects who studied under him say, "He's the one." The church has her picture downstairs—we believe Dr. Ada Robinson.

JE: Was the architect?

MB: Yes.

JE: Do you think its iconic position in Tulsa has also attracted people to the church? They want to come in and they end up becoming members simply because they saw the way the church was. And then they walked in and they said, "Hey, we like what's inside."

MB: Yeah, and other people say it appears big and formal to them. Once they come here, as I've told you, I call visitors myself. And no one says to me, "I came to your church and no one spoke to me. I came to your church and no one cared." I believe anyone who comes to our church will be greeted warmly and will feel that people genuinely care.

One of our young women is in dental school down in San Antonio right now. She told me last weekend that she's been attending a church regularly in San Antonio for almost a year. Her first year in dental school. No one from that church has ever called her.

At Boston Avenue, if I have a working phone number, you will be called the week you visited us.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

MB: We try really hard to be warm an inviting. I think it helps us, you know, several of the television stations around, it's not just channel 8, when they'd show the weather at night

they often have Boston Avenue is on the screen, it's in the picture. We try to light the building so that it's attractive at night and so on.

I'm glad to have a building that's distinctive. The people think of it as a beautiful place; we think it's a beautiful place. We've worked really hard in the thirty-one years I've been here to maintain its integrity. Even like the sconce lighting in the great hall, every piece there is original. None of it is off the shelf. But if something cracks just from heat after eighty, ninety years, we find an artist who can reproduce it. We're really trying to maintain the integrity of our building.

JE: When was the building dedicated?

MB: It was begun in 1927, and they marched down the street on a Sunday morning, Easter Sunday 1929, Easter 1929.

JE: Haven't you done that to replicate that scene?

MB: We did. On our 100th birthday. We were founded in 1893, and in 1993 we went that Sunday morning up the street and marched down with balloons and a brass ensemble leading us down the street.

JE: So you're seventy?

MB: Yeah.

JE: Seventy is young in our day and age now yet. How many more years can you continue here as the senior pastor of this church?

MB: Until three years ago the Methodist church had compulsory retirement of clergy at seventy. In Ft. Worth, Texas, the General Conference met in 2008, and I was surprised when they voted to extend by two years. So it became seventy-two. The way the Discipline now reads, "Methodist clergy must retire at the annual conference following their seventy-second birthday."

So I'm down to years, and now I've got two years.

JE: Are you fearing that?

MB: It concerns me because I love what I do. But I do also know there's a time to step down. I knew when I got to sixty-five I wasn't ready and I had thought, *Well, it's seventy*, because that was the rule of the church. Then suddenly three years ago, boom, it was moved up two years. At the very next break after that vote was taken, my bishop came down where the Oklahoma delegation was seated. Bishops sit up on the big stage, and he came down, walked straight to me and said, "As far as I'm concerned you've got two more."

And I said, "Thank you very much, sir."

All he's asked me is, "Will you give me four months' notice?"

And I said, "Sure," if I decide to go earlier. And we have a pastor parish relations committee, as you know, and I've told them the same, "I'll give you three to four months notice," and they said, "That's fine."

But right now I think I want to go two more years.

JE: Yeah.

MB: My last two years. I really love, I still love what I do.

JE: And beyond that, I'm speaking for you now, you love to speak and you'd have many, many speaking opportunities, so that would never go away.

MB: Well, strangely enough again, John, thirty years ago when I came here almost every Methodist church had an annual preaching series. That's no longer true. Very few still have them, very few. They can't get people to come and support.

Endowed series that I've been to in other churches in other states, I've heard later, "Well, they finally just quit having them because nobody came."

Our annual series here is still well attended, we have really great crowds and we try to bring great preachers. We've got one of the greatest scholars in America coming next year, Dr. Walter Breuggemann will be here.

But I really think, I've convinced myself that the last Sunday at Boston Avenue I will be through. Like taking the sermons out to the street and letting Tulsa trash-haulers haul them away, I think when I no longer preach at Boston Avenue I will no longer preach—period. I believe that will be it for me. I don't want to decline.

I know there is a time and I'm just praying that I'm not losing any of my abilities so far. And if I can make it two more years, if I'm convincing myself that I'm still effective at that point, I really intend to be through.

One of the things that will make that important is if I stay in Tulsa, which is what we want to do, I know that the new pastor, whomever the bishop may send here, will need to really bond with this congregation. So I will do no weddings, I will do no funerals, and I plan to do no preaching. I will be a worshiper, that's it.

Chapter 18 – 9:12
Calling into Ministry

John Erling: You didn't become a bishop—were you asked to be a bishop?

Mouzon Biggs: I was asked if I would run for bishop. Oklahoma had been very successful in getting its people elected bishop because we have a very large delegation in Oklahoma. We're a strong United Methodist state. My five predecessors were elected bishops, but when it came my turn and the Oklahoma delegation elected me number one delegate, which usually is tantamount to nominating you, they then made it official, "We nominate you to be our candidate."

And I said, "Thank you, but I'm not running. I will not accept." I thought when I was a young preacher I would like to be a bishop. But as I got older and I saw what bishops do what I do, no way, no way did I want to do that. I really love being a part of the local church. I love having my family in church with me. If my family were not here, if my two sons had settled somewhere else, things might be different. But the fact that they are here, that they're in church and Sunday school, and we all go eat lunch together afterward, most Saturdays at lunch we're together. And we get to see our little ones playing Little League ball and dance recitals and soccer. Where do I want to go? This is my life.

We first loved the city but the fact that we have family right here, that Gayle and I have not waited for retirement to travel and so on. We learned many, many years ago to budget a percent of our income for travel. She and I have been abroad the last twenty-eight years in the summertime. We've had wonderful trips. It's more now of, "Well, do we want to go Rome again?" You know? "Do we want to go to Paris again?" We've done that. I didn't wait until I retired to do anything really. We together have done what we wanted to do as we've gone along. And I love what I do.

But I think two years from now I will pack up my robe and be quiet.

JE: Yeah. You'll be doing something.

MB: I'll be quiet. [laughing]

JE: You have to do something, you know. Writing books maybe. You have actually written a couple of books.

MB: Yes. But they didn't do all that well.

JE: But didn't you write a book with Dr. Allen?

MB: I did, that one did well because it had his name on it. [laughing]

JE: Students are listening to this, advice to students thinking of their calling into the ministry, how does one know for sure? Some gravitate toward that and they're listening to this, what can you tell them?

MB: I think a person should do what he or she loves to do. I've heard people say, "Well, I never wanted to be a preacher but God made me," or something. I don't even want to hear that person particularly. I want to hear somebody who loves what he or she does. I want to see a baseball player that loves putting on the uniform.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

MB: And going out to do it. I don't think God created us to be miserable. I think God created my brother to be a president of a bank. He created my sister to be a second grade teacher who loved her kids. Because they loved doing what they were doing they enjoyed going to work every day.

My older son is a people person. He loves being an insurance person and bringing broker and major corporation together.

My younger son is a physician and he and his wife really love what they do. So I would say don't become a minister thinking, "Well, I'm not going to like it but I'll miserably do it." There should be a part of knowing that nothing would bring me the joy this does.

In the same way I've heard people say, "Don't be an actor if you can do anything else." I've heard preachers say, "Don't be a preacher if you can do anything else." There was nothing else I could do, in a sense. I mean, I felt, I felt God saying, "This is what I need you to do." And as much as I struggled there for a few months my senior year in high school, I've never doubted since, ever, that I got it. I mean, I learned what the will of God was for me. And that doesn't mean that I haven't needed to make corrections as we've gone along. But ministry was the right thing for me, absolutely the right thing for me.

JE: You know that you know that you know that you know. And that had to be a good feeling.

MB: Yeah.

JE: Because in everybody's business, and in your business and churches, there had to be some strife or arguments within the church and so forth, and you had to never doubt that this was what you were called for.

MB: Yeah.

JE: And that had to give you confidence.

MB: Yeah, but you know, some pastors love being the only Methodist pastor in a small town. So if that's true for you, great. I mean, there are preachers that say to me, "Gee, having the kind of job you have would run me nuts." Well, having their job would run me nuts. I mean, I don't want to be 24/7. I love having people work around me so that we can all have a life along with our ministry.

I really have had a life, a wonderful life. And I've really taken time to be a husband. I've really taken time to be a father and now a grandfather. And I absolutely love it. When I leave here in the late afternoons, by and large, I can be just a husband, a father, and a grandfather, until the next morning, you know, when I get back to work. And on weekends and holidays and so on, I can be a person, a regular person. I have a job but it's not a 24/7 job, we can take turns with our responsibilities.

So making those kinds of decisions about, "Okay, God called me to a minister," but not in this area or that area.

One of my former associates here felt called to be a campus minister, but not the kind that plays ping pong and eats pizza. The kind that's the dean of the chapel, who teaches theology courses and so on. And he was patient, patient, and then, boom, the door opened. I saw him a few weeks ago, I've never seen him so happy.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

MB: I mean, he had a sense of where he needed to be and he was offered the other kind of job, turned it down, appropriately so, until that right one popped for him. And he is so happy. His wife, children, are so happy. You can be a minister but be other kinds.

I've got people on my staff here that feel as called as I am but not called to preach every Sunday.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

MB: Not called to put up with the administrative things. They'd rather be at camp weekend after weekend this summer with teenagers and so on. So being a minister if someone's really asking if this is what God's calling her or him to do, there's still a lot of variety within ministry itself. They don't all have to do the kind I've done, by any means.

JE: Yeah, and that's come down through the years, don't you think?

MB: yes.

JE: Because early on, say back in the '20s, they never thought about the specialization—

MB: Right.

JE: . . . as much as you do today.

MB: Exactly.

JE: But more effective today perhaps because of that specialization.

MB: Yes, and with the reading you do, you know that the big losses in all of our mainline denominations has really come in the rural church. The rural churches are the ones that are dying. The Methodist churches that are growing are the big multiple staff churches. That more people want to come to it. It's like the little Mom and Pop grocery story or the huge supermarket, and we're the supermarket, we're the shopping center where we offer all kinds of things.

Last week at Boston Avenue we had three classes we were offering for elementary age children, twenty cooking with our chef, all week in the kitchen, seeing how do you prepare meals here at Boston Avenue that are nutritious and good and fresh and tasty and all that. And those kids were having a ball.

We had twenty more that wanted to do art work. They were doing Papier-mâché and they were doing pottery and stuff.

And then we had another group doing creative dance. Then we had twenty, twenty, twenty. You couldn't do that in the little church where I grew up. You didn't have sixty elementary age kids in the first place, and you didn't have that many talented adults who could lead them in that many different directions.

We'll have vacation Bible school next week and we'll have two hundred kids here and we'll have all kinds of special offerings for them that a big church can do. We can do Handel's *Messiah* here and do it wonderfully well. We can do the Bach works and the Beethoven works and all of these. We have the big pipe organ with eight thousand pipes and somebody who can play it.

I grew up in a tiny, little church. When I saw the big one, I loved it and was convinced that even if I didn't get to be senior pastor I'd rather be on the team of the big one.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

MB: So those kind of choices you can make as God sort of leads you.

My younger son started out to be a surgeon and then he decided, *If I'm going to marry a young doctor and we're going to have children, I've got to have more control of my time. Frankly said, I don't want to be a doctor eighty hours a week.* He shifted to anesthesiology. He had no patients. He shows up every morning, he scrubs up, he works in the operating room until four and he goes home. The patient belongs to the surgeon, not to him.

JE: Right.

MB: He can be a husband and a father. For him, that was great. For somebody else, maybe not. So if you go into medicine there are different ways you can go. Same with ministry.

Chapter 19 – 3:05
How to Be Remembered

John Erling: So as you look back on your career as a minister and yourself as a person, how would you like us to remember you and your ministry?

Mouzon Biggs: Dr. Warren Hultgren was a dear friend and when I first came to the city he was very kind to me and we often ended up having lunch at the same country club on Sunday after church. Inevitably, as we'd be going down the row of food, he'd say, "Well, Biggs, did you hit a home run today?"

And every week I answered him the same way, I said, "Dr. Hultgren, I never promised to hit a home run. I promised to do the best I could." And I was very sincere about that. I didn't know where anybody would rate me on a scale of 1 to 100 or 1 in 50. I didn't know, certainly when I began, what I was capable of doing. I promised God and the Methodist church, both, that I would do the best that I could do. And I believe I have done my best. I believe I've done the best I can do. I don't shirk my responsibilities on writing a sermon, I still put in the time every week. I don't come here on Sunday morning without being prepared to do the best I can do.

In addition to that, I hope people would see that when they come to my church I don't beat up on them. I may talk about sin, the Bible certainly does, but that's never the point four. Point four is always going to be encouragement. I tell couples I'm about to marry, "If you're not going to live in Tulsa, you find a church where they don't beat up on you every week. Where you walk out the door at the end of the service hearing God whispering to your deepest heart, "You were a Grinch last week but I'm going to help you do this better." "You pouted three days last week, but I'm going to help you do this better."

And I hope that people who have heard me always heard me speaking for God and saying, "God wants to help you do this better. God is not the enemy. God is rooting for you. God wants to help you and if something bad's happening to you, God's grieving with you."

So I hope the gospel has really been the gospel, Good News from me that they can say, "He told us some Good News every Sunday."

JE: Very good. Thank you so much for this time.

MB: Well, I appreciate your hard work you've done.

JE: And you've revealed a lot about yourself and I appreciate it very much. And so will those generations. I always say that this is probably done for those babies who were born today, June 22, 2011. Because when they hear this twenty years from now, twenty-five, they hear the voices speak, it adds an extra dimension and an extra soul to the interview. So I appreciate your time.

MB: Thanks.

Chapter 20 – 0:33
Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience.

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