

Transcript of an Interview with

Alphonse Reff

July 8, 1975

Interviewer: David Taylor

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Mr. Reff was born in 1942 in New Orleans. He is a graduate of Southern Bible Institute and Moody Bible Institute. He is now a pastor at St. Marks A.M.E. Church in Duluth.

The interview concerns the history of that church and Duluth's Black community.

The quality of the tape recording is poor and portions are unclear. It is a verbatim transcript of intelligible portions, edited slightly for clarity. The tape recording is available in the Society's Audio-Visual library.

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Taylor: This is an oral interview with Reverend Alphonse Reff of St. Mark's AME Church, 530 North Fifth Ave. East, Duluth, Minnesota. This interview was taken in the rectory of St. Mary's Church on July 8, 1975. Reverend Reff originally came to Duluth on vacation in 1966 and later returned to start his ministry at St. Mark's Church in 1973. He was born in New Orleans, Louisiana July 26, 1942. And he is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Simon Reff, Junior, presently living at Ventura, Louisiana. Reverend Reff took instruction at Southern University at Baton Rouge, and is a graduate of Moody Bible Institute.

Reverend Reff, when and where were you born?

Reff: I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana July 26, 1942.

Taylor: What are your parents' names and where do they currently reside?

Reff: They are Mr. and Mrs. Simon Reff of Batchelor, Louisiana.

Taylor: We're sitting here in St. Mark's Church, which is possibly the oldest church in the city.

Reff: Oldest black church in the city.

Taylor: What do you know of this church's history?

Reff: St. Mark's was established along about 1800.

Taylor: 1800?

Reff: 1800. In the 1800's approximately. It's always been a cooperative church, working for the cause of blacks in the community. And they've always had a large-sized membership here. But due to the lack of work in Duluth many families have moved away and tended grass elsewhere. I have been reading some of the old records. St. Mark's has done a tremendous job in the community and met the needs of the people in the community. There were outstanding pastors. And we only have two pastors of St. Mark's living; the Reverend Nolan Smith, who now lives in Minneapolis, and myself. We are the only two living pastors in Duluth.

Taylor: What is the size of the St. Mark's congregation at the present?

Reff: The size of St. Mark's congregation now . . . We have a membership of thirty-five persons - in full membership. But we have students from UMD (University of Minnesota, Duluth) and St. Scholastica and the University in Superior, Wisconsin. They come and worship with us. In fact, three members from Superior State University have membership in this church. And they were originally from Baptist churches outside the city. But they attend services because of the black congregation at St. Mark's and what St. Mark's is trying to do.

St. Mark's reaches beyond the walls of the church. Every Thursday night the pastor, such as myself, we go to Sandstone Study Institute and we have service with the children of Sandstone. And we counsel them and talk with them, and on two occasions they have sent up to Duluth and they have rendered service with the choir. We have a beautiful fellowship. And then the white community of St. Mark's reaches beyond those walls. We work with the Christian fellowship. We have other churches come in and participate in our program. And in October of this year we will have an exchange of pulpits. One of our white brothers will come in and preach to the congregation of St. Mark's AME Church.

Taylor: What other community-type outreach programs do you have that relate specifically to the black community?

Reff: St. Mark's doesn't have any of it's own. But St. Mark's has been very helpful in establishing the Institute for Afro-Awareness which is located at 2307 Superior Street. I, Reverend Reff, am one of the board members. And we help the YMCA . . . and just try to open our doors to the community as a whole. And if you want to go into organizations, the Masonic, they have their meetings here at St. Mark's AME Church, and they assemble for worship services on St. John's Day, which is the twenty-fourth of June. And the Eastern Stars - they assemble here for services.

Taylor: What type of rapport do you have with the other black churches, Calvary and New Hope?

Reff: We have very good relationship with Calvary and New Hope. New Hope is one of the newer churches here. Calvary and St. Mark's have been working together over the years. In fact, they share the Christmas services, the New Year's service and Thanksgiving service. They have communion service together. And every time one of the churches has a program, the other supports it.

As of now, Reverend Henry Martin, the pastor at New Hope, and Reverend Witherspoon [pastor at Calvary] and myself are in the process of establishing a black ministerial alliance here. And this is not only invited to the black ministers, but to the white ministers as well, to come in for fellowship and to take part. The purpose of this union is to really establish a real relationship with the three churches, so that all people will be able to identify with (not only) one church, but with the Church as a whole. This is the goal of St. Mark's - to give identity to the people.

St. Mark's has former members that have been in the Air Force and they have worked in St. Mark's. I would like to pay special tribute to Mrs. Geraldine (Burke?). Her husband is in the Air Force here and she came to St. Mark's and she has worked faithfully. She

has organized the Martha Allen Circle in St. Mark's Church, and they are doing a tremendous job, including enlisting the young people in service for Christ. The age limit is from eighteen to twenty-five. They have done a tremendous job in getting the young people together in the church and in the community.

Taylor: What is the size of the black community in Duluth?

Reff: As of now, the size of the black community in Duluth here now has a population of over 1500 blacks. We have approximately nine hundred, give or take, that are permanent residents here and the other percentage is made up of the Duluth Air Base. The Duluth Air Base employs the majority of our blacks here. And the second place is U.S. Steel Company. They employ the next percentage of the blacks. But the Duluth Air Base is the greatest employer of blacks here.

Taylor: Could you tell me something about the present structure here? How old is it? When was it built?

Reff: The present structure of St. Mark's is eighty-six years old.

Taylor: Eighty-six years old.

Reff: The cornerstone was laid in 1913. But before the cornerstone was laid, they had worship services here in the basement. Then in 1925 they laid the upper structure of St. Mark's AME Church. And the building was well-built. It has a brick finish, beautiful stained glass windows, imposing interior, solid oak wood, plastered walls, and the ceiling is a round shape. The floor is inclined towards the pulpit with carpet. And the basement is a well-suited structure for many purposes such as organization meetings and church services.

Taylor: The cornerstone was laid though, in 1913.

Reff: 1913.

Taylor: Was the stained glass windows made by local black artisans, do you know, or . . .

Reff: No. It was not made by black artisans, but they were donated by black artisans. But the glass was made by the St. Germain Glass Company. St. Germain is located at First Street and Lake Avenue. A lot of the stained glass windows were presented by the black masonic here. If you look around, all the symbols you see on them represent Masonic symbols, with the exception of the few that were donated by the parish here.

Taylor: I take it then that . . . How much was involved in erecting this? Was it a very expensive structure for it's time?

Reff: It was pretty expensive. But then again, what the blacks were not able to do, according to history that is published from the library, the whites helped St. Mark's financially. As of now, St. Mark's is the only black church in this community that is free of debt. It doesn't have a mortgage or anything on this church. Around 1944 or 45, they had a fire here at St. Mark's. But the members went out into the community and were able to get enough financial support to redecorate the structure.

Taylor: The structure wasn't structurally damaged though, by the fire?

Reff: It wasn't really damaged by the fire or burned to the ground. Some rooms were burned, but they were able to secure enough finances to re-establish it.

Taylor: Was the church before the fire similar to the structure we are in now, or was it . . . Did they redesign it or anything like that?

Reff: No. (unclear) It was just a light fire. According to the information I have, they were having services and lightning struck the structure, and the fire was started in the basement and came up through the sanctuary. But it wasn't really that bad, but it was damaged. There was about fifteen or sixteen hundred dollars worth of damage. (unclear)

During the early years St. Mark's was able to keep a full-time pastor. But after the Depression years and the membership decreased, they were not able to keep a full-time pastor until the year 1968. The Reverend Charles Copeland was pastor here from 1932 to '34, and he came here to be pastor in the late sixties, '68, until 1972 when they were able to get him as a full-time pastor. Reverend Nolan Smith came here, but was not ready to move to the city of Duluth. He was a retired railroad worker. And then myself (unclear) . . . concerned about the congregation here . . . I couldn't find a better congregation. I made an application to the general conference and was assigned here.

As of now, for the record, St. Mark's is the only black church here in Duluth that has taken out a life membership in the NAACP. They have paid their full life membership. They gave the banners June 22. They sent the three hundred and fifty dollar banners for the full life membership in the NAACP.

Taylor: Does the congregation live in the immediate vicinity of the church or . . .

Reff: Yes, the congregation lives within the immediate vicinity of the church. In fact, within walking distance of the church, located in the Central-Hillside area. This is where the greatest percentage of your blacks are located, in the Central-Hillside area.

Taylor: And does the congregation enjoy any fellowship with the other AME churches in the Twin Cities?

Reff: Yes. St. Mark's has a great fellowship with the other churches - AME churches - in the Twin Cities area. In fact this year - May 15 of this year - we had the Reverend (unclear) and his wife came up to be the speaker for Women's Day. And then on June the fifteenth, which was Father's Day, we had the Reverend Thomas Cooper come up and preach on Men's Day at St. Mark's AME Church. And in November of '74 we had the Reverend (unclear) from Rockford, Illinois come up and preach the church anniversary. And we have fellowship with the other churches. In fact July thirteenth I will be preaching at the St. James' AME Church in Minneapolis, sponsored by the Reverend (unclear). As we were able, like I say, we were able to work with the other AME churches in the facility out of the city and what have you.

Taylor: Now are there any blacks living outside the city of Duluth, either farther north or west that perhaps come to St. Mark's or Calvary or New Hope for religious services periodically?

Reff: Yes, we have quite a few that comes out for this. In fact, the former pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Reverend Stanford Jones, he comes up for all programs. And if I'm out of town or something, he takes care of the pulpit of St. Mark's AME Church.

Taylor: Where does he live?

Reff: He lives in Minneapolis. And we have Mr. Charles (Lee?). He lives in Milwaukee and he was a faithful worker here at St. Mark's. And he comes (unclear). And St. Mark's is fortunate to have some of our young people such as Mr. Bruce Carter, who used to work with the young people (unclear) fellowship. And he has gone on to graduate from the University of Minnesota and then he went on to the Harvard school.

So St. Mark's is fortunate to have this type of fellowship. In fact we had (unclear) from Minneapolis visiting with us last Sunday. He visited, he and his wife. Back in 1973 I baptized their

first baby here at St. Mark's AME Church. So we had people come in. We have people from all over come for fellowship with St. Mark's. We have a young lady from New Orleans, Louisiana. Her husband is stationed at the base here. She was visiting St. Mark's Sunday, and after service she approached me and said that she is considering membership here at St. Mark's. Like I said before, St. Mark's tries to reach the whole community as a whole.

I would like to say that St. Mark's has three members here with over fifty years of service in St. Mark's - Brother and Sister Fred Bell and Carrie Dozier. In fact, Carrie Dozier is the oldest living member here at St. Mark's AME Church. And you have Mrs. Emma Latz who is deceased. But she was one of the founders of St. Mark's AME Church. When she died, she was one hundred years of age. So we are grateful and (unclear) that the membership of St. Mark's will continue to prosper as it has in the past.

And talking with those two members, in the later (early) years of St. Mark's, has said that you had to be here before eleven o'clock to get a seat. The church was over-crowded. And we are still looking forward for that.

Sunday was the first Sunday - our communion Sunday - the first time in history that St. Mark's has ever been able to have communion of over one hundred people. In 1973, when St. Mark's had the union service with Calvary and New Hope, they had two hundred and five people assembled here for the Thanksgiving service. So we consider this a great honor for St. Mark's - black and white assembled here for this service.

Taylor: What is the seating capacity of the church?

Reff: The seating capacity of the church is two hundred and fifty. And if we decide to put a few chairs around the pulpit and down the aisle, you could seat at least three hundred people.

(End of tape)