

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Roberts, Joseph L. (Joseph Lawrence) |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts, |
| Dates: | September 14, 2007 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2007 |
| Physical Description: | 6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:54:30). |
| Abstract: | Pastor Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts (1935 - 2015) was handpicked by Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. to be senior pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Roberts was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 14, 2007, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2007_263 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Reverend Joseph L. Roberts was born on February 17, 1935 in Chicago, Illinois. Roberts attended Chicago Public Schools throughout his childhood and graduated cum laude from Knoxville College in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1956. In the 1960s, Roberts attended the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and obtained his Masters of Divinity (M.Div.) degree; he subsequently attended Princeton Theological Seminary, where he earned his Masters of Theology degree.

During the early part of the 1970s, Roberts became senior pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia; handed picked by Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. Roberts served as the senior pastor for a total of thirty years and was recognized for being an energetic orator and an accomplished musician. During the thirty years that Roberts presided as pastor, as many as 2,000 new members were added to the church's congregation. Under Roberts's leadership, Ebenezer Baptist Church's congregation's financial giving also increased 300 percent. When Roberts took the helm at Ebenezer Baptist Church, he launched an extensive community outreach program that included the Teenage Mother's Ministry; tutoring and counseling programs; a food co-op; and an older adult daycare center. Roberts also envisioned starting a parochial school that would concentrate on providing a good education and clear role models for young males. Roberts was an accomplished administrator who successfully negotiated bank financing for Ebenezer's new Horizon Sanctuary; the sanctuary, dedicated on March 21, 1999, was an eight-million-dollar edifice which encompassed the early roots of Christianity as well as symbols of African American heritage.

In 2004, Roberts was a recipient of distinguished alumni awards from Union Theological Seminary and Princeton Theological Seminary. In 2006 Roberts published *Sideswiped by Eternity: Sermons from Ebenezer Baptist Church*; this collection of sermons demonstrates Roberts's commitment to the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the lives of his parishioners, and the message of Jesus Christ.

Roberts was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* in 2007.

Roberts passed away on February 15, 2015. He is survived by his wife, Esther Wortham Roberts, one son, two daughters and six grandchildren.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts was conducted by Denise Gines on September 14, 2007, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Pastor Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts (1935 - 2015) was handpicked by Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr. to be senior pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Roberts, Joseph L. (Joseph Lawrence)

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Roberts, Joseph L. (Joseph Lawrence)--Interviews

African American clergy--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Ebenezer Baptist Church (Atlanta, Ga.)

Occupations:

Pastor

HistoryMakers® Category:

ReligionMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts, September 14, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts, Section A2007_263_001_001, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts was born on February 17, 1935 in Chicago, Illinois to Marguerite Reed Roberts and Joseph L. Roberts, Sr. His maternal grandparents, Nora Robinson Reed and hotel valet Felix Reed, were from Paducah, Kentucky. After marrying, they moved with Roberts' maternal great-grandmother, Maggie Robinson, to Chicago, Illinois, where they raised six children. Roberts' paternal grandparents, Russell Roberts and Sallie Roberts, owned a sixty-acre farm in Monticello, Georgia, and had nine children. His father attended Knoxville College, and then Chicago's McCormick Theological Seminary; while his mother studied at the Chicago Normal College, and earned a master's degree from Wayne State University. Roberts' parents met and married in Chicago, where his father pastored the Coppin Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church, and his mother taught. They raised Roberts and his sister in an all-black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, where he attended Edmund Burke Elementary School.

African American clergy--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts, Section A2007_263_001_002, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts grew up on the South Side of Chicago, Illinois, where he transferred to Austin O. Sexton Elementary School after his family moved to 61st Street. Unable to participate in sports after contracting tuberculosis at fourteen years old, Brown read frequently. He went on to attend Englewood High School, where he was inducted into the National Honor Society, and aspired to a career in dentistry or law. Although his father, Pastor Joseph L. Roberts, Sr., was transferred to a church in Detroit, Michigan, Roberts remained in Chicago until graduating in 1953. He then matriculated at Knoxville College, where he studied history, sociology and religion. He was inspired by college president James A. Colston and his wife, history professor Wilhelmina White Colston; as well as minister Frank Gordon, who influenced Roberts to join the Presbyterian church. When Roberts graduated in 1956, Professor Charles E. Morton helped him secure admission to New York City's Union Theological Seminary.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts, Section A2007_263_001_003, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts attended New York City's Union Theological Seminary from 1956. His peers included Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. and civil rights activist J. Oscar McCloud. As a student minister, Roberts worked at the Church of the Master, where he was inspired by Pastor James Herman Robinson's Operation Crossroads Africa project. Upon graduating in 1959, he became the first black pastor at the integrated Weequahic Presbyterian Church in Newark, New Jersey. Roberts grew the congregation from 14 to 125 members, while facing discrimination due to his race and young age. In 1962, he was called to pastor the Elmwood United Presbyterian Church in East Orange, New Jersey, where he expanded the membership, and led the church out of debt. With educator E. Alma Flagg, Roberts advocated for voting rights, and the hiring of black school administrators. He first met Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. through Congressman William H. Gray, III; and, in 1968, spoke at Dr. King's memorial in East Orange.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts, Section A2007_263_001_004,

TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts joined the national office of the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1970. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, he travelled to churches in sixteen states across the South to improve race relations, and was often met with racial discrimination from the all-white congregations. Roberts was then promoted to director of the Division of Corporate and Social Missions, despite his disagreement with the church's permissive approach to the Vietnam War and South African apartheid. In 1974, Congressman William H. Gray, III requested that Roberts become Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr.'s co-pastor at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Later that year, King, Sr. resigned after his wife, Alberta Williams King, was shot and killed, and the congregation voted unanimously to install Roberts as his successor. Roberts assumed the pastorate of Ebenezer Baptist Church in 1975, and went on to establish the church's Intergenerational Resource Center, a senior care facility.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts, Section A2007_263_001_005, TRT: 0:28:00 ?

Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts leased the Ebenezer Baptist Church building to the National Park Service in exchange for land to build the \$8.5 million Horizon Sanctuary, so that his congregation could worship away from tourists. Roberts' loan request of \$6.5 million was rejected by the majority banking institutions, but he collaborated with James E. Young of the Citizens Trust Bank and other black banks nationwide to create a sufficient loan package. The Horizon Sanctuary, which was built to resemble an African meeting house, was completed in 1999. Roberts also talks about the programs he initiated at Ebenezer Baptist Church, including a ministry for adolescent mothers; a weekly food co-op; humanitarian Elisabeth Omilami's food program for those experiencing homelessness; Genesis Shelter, Inc., a children's shelter; and the Project Spirit program, which recruited retired teachers to tutor students in math and reading. Roberts also remembers his predecessor, Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts, Section A2007_263_001_006, TRT: 0:26:40 ?

Reverend Dr. Joseph L. Roberts announced his retirement in 2004, after twenty-nine years as pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He assembled a hiring committee of nine board members, who selected Raphael G. Warnock, the former assistant pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City, as Roberts' successor. Robert retired in 2005, and went on to write and publish his book, 'Sideswiped By Eternity: Sermons From Ebenezer Baptist Church,' a collection of thirty sermons from his time at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. From 2006 to 2007, Roberts assisted Atlanta's Mount Olive Baptist Church in their search for a new pastor, and served as the pastor during the interim period. Roberts also describes his concerns for the African American community, and reflects upon his family, life and legacy.