

Keith Tonkel

David Crosby: This is David Crosby and I'm at Wells Memorial United Methodist Church on Bailey Avenue in Jackson, Mississippi. Today is the 18th of December, 2014, and I am with Pastor Keith Tonkel. We are here to get him to tell us a little bit about himself and some of the stories he is famous for telling and that kind of thing. This is all for the Oral History Program associated with the University of Southern Mississippi and their archive of oral histories that they keep down there. Keith let's get some biographical information like place of birth.

Keith Tonkel: Yeah, I was born in New Orleans at a very young age and born somewhere in the French Quarter in a yellow cab.

Crosby: Is that right?

Tonkel: Yeah, my Dad was a night club entertainer and he had played a gig and Mom was with him and so they were on their way to Touro Infirmary but the baby was born in a cab they tell me. I don't know.

Crosby: Well, if that's what they say!

Tonkel: I believe it's true.

Crosby: What was your father's name?

Tonkel: My father's name Dennie. Dennie Lindsey Tonkel. My Daddy was a very famous drummer.

Crosby: Lindsey, is that (spells out).

Tonkel: Lindsey (spells out). In 1904 my Daddy got the patent on the trap set that drummers now all take for granted. He invented it by using and nobody knows why they call it trap set. He used the action of rat traps to make the high hat cymbal and the base drum fell.

Crosby: Wow! That's interesting.

Tonkel: It is interesting.

Crosby: Well, do you know where he was born?

Tonkel: Yeah he was born in Ft. Wayne.

Crosby: Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

Tonkel: Yeah.

Crosby: And he fell in love with the South?

Tonkel: Fell in love with my Mama. He was down here on a gig with Paul Whiteman Band when he met my Mama.

Crosby: I see and so he was a drummer.

Tonkel: He was a drummer and she was the big debutante of the town and my grandmother said they could not get married. So they did.

Crosby: That's a sure consequence.

Tonkel: Yeah.

Crosby: Was there a particular band he was associated with? You said Paul Whiteman?

Tonkel: He played with Whiteman. He played with all the big bands but one of the interesting ones was he was with Red Nichols and the Five Pennies early on and that's the group that Glenn Miller and Jimmy Dorsey and Tommy came out of. At least that is what they always tell us. All that is the history that has been imparted to us.

Crosby: Well I remember the movie watching the Five Pennies back when I was a kid.

Tonkel: Yeah. Now Dad was not with them the whole time but.

Crosby: In the early years.

Tonkel: Yeah. That's an interesting story. He was walking one day and heard them playing and knocked on the door and Red came and he said what? And he told him well we don't have a drummer. You want to sit in?

Crosby: That's a good story.

Tonkel: Yeah.

Crosby: What was your Mother's maiden name?

Tonkel: Her name was Richter (spells out). Actually.

Crosby: And her first name?

Tonkel: Louise.

Crosby: Ok.

Tonkel: Middle name Franz (spells out) and she was born in New Orleans.

Crosby: She was born in New Orleans. She was a debutante.

Tonkel: She was a debutante. One of my favorite stories about Mama is that we don't need to put on any kind of air while she was in one of the large carnival balls. And that's like those big spotlights they used in WW II were in vogue.

Crosby: Oh.

Tonkel: And she came out her panties fell, and so she did a bow and picked them up and stuck them in her breast with the spotlight on her.

Crosby: The original costume malfunction.

Tonkel: Yeah, you got that right.

Crosby: Do you know when they got married?

Tonkel: 1929.

Crosby: That was in New Orleans? Did they run away?

Tonkel: I don't think they were married in New Orleans. I think they were married en route.

Crosby: Route to?

Tonkel: Yeah, I don't know but from what we understand Mama went with him for his next gig and I think it was somewhere in the Detroit area because they were playing in Detroit at that time but I'm not sure about where they were married.

Crosby: Ok. Did she have any occupations?

Tonkel: Yes. She was a nurse.

Crosby: A nurse.

Tonkel: A nurse. She was a WWII nurse. Which was one of those quickie courses you know.

Crosby: And did she go overseas at all?

Tonkel: No. She was here. One in particular tidbit is that in New Orleans Daddy was one of the principals in the Civil Defense group during the war when we thought we were going to be bombed and stuff.

Crosby: Good. And you have been married.

Tonkel: Yes.

Crosby: And her name was?

Tonkel: Her name was Pat Myrick Tonkel. Patsy Joyce Myrick Tonkel.

Crosby: Myrick (spells out).

Tonkel: Myrick (spells out).

Crosby: And were you married here in Jackson?

Tonkel: No. We were married on the coast at my previous church, 46 years before she died.

Crosby: Was that in Gulfport or?

Tonkel: Yeah my previous church was Guinn in Gulfport and that's kind of important because that is where the Born of Conviction Statement was signed; called Guinn Memorial.

Crosby: Guinn Memorial.

Tonkel: United Methodist Church. It's scuttlebutt, Mr. Guinn was quite a character and gave some money to buy a lot near the end of his days because he wanted to try and get some brownie points.

Crosby: What was the date of your marriage?

Tonkel: My marriage was April 28, 1968.

Crosby: Well I married earlier than you did.

Tonkel: You did?

Crosby: I married in 1964.

Tonkel: In '64. Well bless you. How about that!

Crosby: What about your schooling?

Tonkel: I went to Bay High School at Bay St. Louis where I was raised. Born in New Orleans and raised on the coast. My sister, Denise, this is an interesting story, was extremely sick and after she was born we would take turns keeping her at night because she never slept. And we went over from New Orleans to the Bay to spend the weekend with friends and the next morning we woke up and realized that none of us had been up during the night and we thought she had died and there was this horrible rush to the room and she was sleeping gently and the doctors pointed out to us there was a significant difference in the atmosphere in New Orleans and the Bay caused by pine trees. What was interesting when we went back after that weekend we left and when we went into Louisiana across the bridge on the old Sheaf Highway there were all these pine trees and on the other side nothing but marsh. Not a single tree. See you could actually see the difference once you heard about it. Well anyway.

Crosby: And after high school you went to?

Tonkel: I went to Millsaps.

Crosby: Millsaps.

Tonkel: With \$8.43 and did not know that you had to be admitted to college to go. I just started going. The President, Ellis Singers said well we can arrange for you

to come to the January session. This was in June. I said I am sorry sir, I've got to go Monday because I don't have any place to go. So they arranged it for me. Maybe the janitor, a guy from the football gym gave me a little (?). So it was lovely.

Crosby: I guess so. Did you get a degree?

Tonkel: Yeah I got a degree from there in Philosophy.

Crosby: Bachelors in Philosophy.

Tonkel: And then went to St. Mary after my first round of cancer. Since we are story telling I will tell it quickly. I had a very pious doctor being a member of First Baptist Church and after about (I had a tumor surgery. You don't even want to hear about that) but after a while I was in the bed and he came in and sat on the edge of the bed; Dr. Tom Safley. He said son I am a religious man but I'm fixing to wax eloquent and I said yes sir. He said you die as well as anybody I have ever known but you don't fight to live worth a damn! At that point I decided I was through with the hospital I was going on to graduate school and six weeks later I was in Emory. I went to graduate school at Emory at Cameron and finished there and my PhD, I would have worked was in religion and psychiatry. I did a residency at Georgia Baptist Hospital.

Crosby: And that was from Emory, the PhD?

Tonkel: That was from Emory, yeah well the PhD I never did get because the last six months we had to go to Houston for a final residency and Dr. Quinton Hand, head of the department, died unexpectedly with heart disease. We found out later that he was paying for everything. So I couldn't afford to go. But I had to work anyway. So Millsaps gave me a Doctorate Degree later, so I wouldn't miss that one too bad.

Crosby: Did you ever go to seminary?

Tonkel: It was at Emory.

Crosby: At Emory.

Tonkel: At Emory. That was the Cameron School of Theology and it was there as a part of the pastoral care department that we did the special work in religion and psychiatry. It was an extension of the seminary.

Crosby: So that was pastoral care that involved methods of dealing with parishioners who needed specific kinds of help.

Tonkel: We had learned after three years of an intense study that there are some people that you can help and there are some people that you have to send somewhere else.

Crosby: So by this time, by the time you went to Graduate school you had decided on the lifetime work as a.

Tonkel: No I decided that in high school.

Crosby: In high school?

Tonkel: Yeah. I felt very strongly, which is another story. They give you a list of preferred professions. If you want to be a doctor you put one by doctor. And in number 28 I put the ministry in 28. I put housewife and garbage collector and everything else before the ministry. And then finally at graduation time in high school, I felt it was time to quit fighting. One interesting tidbit is that at Millsaps I was very active in the drama department and we had done a play that Leslie Stephens, our battle star galactic a guy had written and he came with an agent from MGM to see the play and after it offered three of us screening test. All three said no and he said nobody ever said no. He wanted to know why. I said you don't want to know because you won't believe it. And he said, because he is a very secular guy, he said no, I want to know. I said because I felt called to the ministry. I fought it too long and I am tired of fighting it and that is what I am going to do. And there was the cutest thing too. One of the other two, Claudette Hall, a pretty red headed lady, said I don't want to do it because I don't want to be the first woman that significant in Canadian politics. And Claudette was the first woman mayor of a Province in Canada. That was an interesting story.

Crosby: Remarkable.

Tonkel: Yeah.

Crosby: This was in your high school?

Tonkel: This was in college.

Crosby: This was in college.

Tonkel: Yeah at Millsaps. It was in high school when I decided for the ministry for sure.

Crosby: It sounds as if you fought this for a while.

Tonkel: I did. My interests always was physics and medicine. As an eleven year old I designed a three stage rocket and they all thought I was crazy. That was in 1946.

Crosby: Did you ever test it?

Tonkel: Yeah it worked fine.

Crosby: Great!

Tonkel: It blew up but it worked fine!

Crosby: Richard is a drone pilot.

Tonkel: I also know Richard developed an electric engine that ran off magnets. They were just amazed with this. It was a powerful wonderful engine but it had one short coming. I said what? He said no torque. So he couldn't do anything else.

Crosby: So you came out of the seminary with this work in religion and medicine.

Tonkel: Right. In our part of the church you serve the congregation as a student pastor and I served one year, my senior year, at Springridge Church, and then in Atlanta during my seminary years I served the Northside Methodist Church. One little tidbit that's curious too is that I was at Fondren Church here at Fondren Presbyterian Church for over a year during my treatments for cancer. Methodist hire from June to June and Presbyterians hire whenever they want to. So that was real helpful to me and the curious thing about that is during that time I became very close to William Winter because he was very, very active in the church then

and also J. Woody McDill, the pastor there was a very progressive voice in the South during those days.

Crosby: And this was while you were in the hospital?

Tonkel: I came out of the hospital and went straight to Fondren.

Crosby: Fondren?

Tonkel: Fondren Presbyterian right over here.

Crosby: Yeah, I have been there.

Tonkel: An interesting place.

Crosby: Yeah. Ok so then after graduating did you get a?

Tonkel: Yes I was sent to the church on the coast. Guinn (spells out) on the coast and I went there in '62.

Crosby: 1962.

Tonkel: I was there four weeks and the court called me and said can we see you next week? The youth court. And I said yeah, and they said you know this little boy that cut your grass and I said yeah. And they said the one that they hit over the head, the foster family, and I said yeah. And they said we have your letter here and we want you to take him home. So I got four kids from the court making \$1,600.00 a year, single and making \$1,600.00 a year. But what happened was that little church was too sweet. This was back when I was at the church just a little while. I was kind of like the big brother and the church was the Mama and Daddy. Like after services on Sunday I would drop two of them off at one house and one at another you know for lunch and afternoons.

Crosby: So you were a foster parent.

Tonkel: Foster parent early on there.

Crosby: At that young age without a wife.

Tonkel: Twenty three years old my wife inherited the kids. Yeah before we had our own.

Crosby: So you were at Guinn in '62 and did you stay there very long?

Tonkel: 71/2 years, before coming here.

Crosby: And then you came to Jackson.

Tonkel: I came to Jackson asking for an innercity congregation like this one. The neighborhood was already beginning to change. And I felt that's where I should be.

Crosby: And that was right here at Wells.

Tonkel: At Wells in 1962.

Crosby: And was it called Wells then.

Tonkel: It was called Wells then in 1969 when I came here. Previously it was called Glendale Church. The pastor Jim Wells was killed in a car wreck and they renamed it to honor him.

Crosby: So you were still down on the coast then when the Meredith incident occurred at Ole Miss.

Tonkel: Yeah.

Crosby: You pastors put together the Born of Conviction statement.

Tonkel: Yes. I was serving there when they came up with that.

Crosby: And were these four who were involved in the drafting of the document? At least the information I have were friends of yours? You knew them from seminary?

Tonkel: I knew some of them better than others. I knew Maxie Dunnam quite well because he had served a church in town across from where I was and I had known him and I knew Jerry Furr pretty well. The others I knew less. One of the very important dimensions of it to me was upon signing the document I told them, I said you realize this is going to be very involved and they said well no it's too little. It's not saying a lot. I said this could be very involved and before I sign this I want to know are you guys planning on staying in Mississippi. Because there is no merit in it to sign and leave. And they said oh we are definitely going to stay. So I signed it with that understanding because I believed in the content of it which

was in that day and time would be considered pretty basic. We basically said in summary was we believe in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the public school system, and we are not communist. That was kind of the gist of it.

Crosby: And the freedom of the pulpit.

Tonkel: Yeah and the freedom of the pulpit. My church had a secret meeting at night late in the evening after it happened. I decided to go because it couldn't be official if the pastor wasn't present. So I went in and it was kind of interesting, they were real surprised to see me. It was midnight and I told them I said I understand that you need to meet but in order to make it official let me come in and let me say a prayer or something. I said I will do whatever you want. So they said say a prayer and I did and I left. Then about 4:00 in the morning the Board Chairman came. It was cold and raining and a whole group at 4:00 in the morning, probably five or six people from the church that just wanted to sit with me. They came to the door and their statement was that we talked long and hard and the opinions of our pastor are not necessarily our opinions but we want you to stay. So I was very fortunate because a lot were not asked to stay and even explained why they wanted me to stay and asked permission from me to write a letter to the Conference saying that my points of view were not necessarily theirs and I told them that was all together correct and to do that which they did not do. Left me curious about why they wanted to stay.

Crosby: I was about to ask that if you don't mind sharing.

Tonkel: I don't mind sharing at all. One person said when Mama was sick you not only sat with her but you changed her bedpan you know and that kind of thing. Because you know I'm not much of a preacher but I'm a pastor. I do love the people and care about that. My present illness is real frustrating to me because I can't do that like I want to but I still can do some. I'll be at the hospital tomorrow at 5:00 in the morning with somebody having surgery. Those are the kinds of dimensions of doing ministry that allow you to make statements of conviction, Born of Conviction.

Crosby: In the Catholic Church we call that the Corporal Works of Mercy.

Tonkel: In my younger years that's where I was on the coast in the Catholic Church, one day I took very strong issue with the sermon of the priest and he, I was an altar boy and he put his arm around me and we were walking out, he said Keith you know you always ask too damn many questions. I figured I was out of there you know. But yeah I liked that thing. I have great respect for the Roman Church and still have lovely friends in the priesthood and beyond.

Crosby: I can tell a story can't I?

Tonkel: Yeah sure.

Crosby: Sarah, when we first got to Alcorn, we went over to the Newman Center there. Father Canjemi was the pastor there and he was recruiting servers, altar boys and Sarah wanted to be a server. She said she couldn't be a server because she was a girl. She said you are letting these little non Catholic boys be servers and you want let me be a server. He said no you can't. So she said bye!

Tonkel: Interesting that was my "bye" day too! One of the curious things is my son likes to go to an old Jesuit church across the street from the Roosevelt when we are in New Orleans and they have a girl in charge of the worship service and all the rest is in Latin but I said to the Bishop, I knew the Bishop over there, I said how do you handle that church? He said they play like they don't do it.

Crosby: Wells has a reputation under your leadership for being inclusive for inviting anyone who wants to come to be part of the church. Was that part of your conviction back in '62, '63?

Tonkel: Oh absolutely. That was the heart of my conviction. That's even rooted in a different place. It is, that is my clear understanding of God's intention in Christ. The Christ who reached beyond the borders of his day and time and we thought we would do that. It was very interesting because two moments of great stress felt, felt stress, in the life of Wells and Guinn Church was when we had our first black visitors. From Camp Landin they came at Guinn on the coast a Mennonite community. In Jackson of all places we expected our first visitors to be from Millsaps but they came from M.C.

Crosby: Really!

Tonkel: Yeah, two and when they came in you could feel the stress and the tension you know. Even though we talked about it and they sat in the front. I said hey guys it's good to see you! I said you have come into what I call free worship and I said during free worship sometime people have a song they like or a thought they want to express. Would either one of you be interested and this one boy said you wouldn't sing my song! And I said what? And he said it's Swing Low. So, we sang it and you could feel the tension leave and the kind of door of hearts open up you know. It was kind of a significant moment. It really was.

Crosby: Is music one of your particular interests?

Tonkel: Music is one of the things that I think opens the heart of people. One of the great difficulties.

Crosby: Was that your father's influence?

Tonkel: Yeah, yeah. I said and I didn't realize I was so emotional about it. Our Board met Sunday and I've said to them look aren't yall tired of this voice? I said one of the things that hurts me is I can't sing anymore and I got emotional. I didn't realize how deeply that was felt. But in the last surgery there was a tumor in an area where nobody else would touch it and allowed me to be alive. I think the part of the nerve on that side of the vocal fold. They don't say vocal cords anymore.

Crosby: Well I've been a singer all my life.

Tonkel: Well bless your heart.

Crosby: A choir boy and on up.

Tonkel: That's good.

Crosby: It's one of those things that it's like any other muscle you have you have to exercise.

Tonkel: That's exactly right and mine is just a surgical problem. I'm doing speech therapy. You wouldn't believe. I go to speech therapy after this.

Crosby: Maybe you will get it back!

Tonkel: They said not much. I am very good at falsetto

Crosby: Were you ever in the military?

Tonkel: No. I was never in the military. I volunteered but I think it was after Korea I volunteered but they said at that time they needed Chaplains to go on to school and then I could serve. And then another thing; I know it sounds like a copout but it's the God's truth. But as I left the recruiting area they said your feet are too flat too.

Crosby: All those forced marches.

Tonkel: As a child I had to wear braces and all.

Crosby: Other activities and interest other than the ministry you want to share with us? Wood work or something?

Tonkel: I don't do woodwork like that. I've always been interested in; I like to travel but I have always been interested in automobiles. I like to buy a lot of cars; Help the church people buy a lot of cars. It began and it's all based on my understanding of justice and one of the ladies in the church was paying much, much too much for a car and I said look before you do that deal let me go down and we went down and we got it cut \$1,600.00 and they still paid \$900.00. I mean I know businesses have to stay in business but from that people began to ask me to do it. So it's fun to kind of help from time to time. It's no big deal and one of the companies actually offered me a fifty dollar stipend and I said no because then I wouldn't do it with a pure heart. Well I'm trying to think. I am pretty avid exerciser even now despite all of this based on a series of exercise that were given to me by my oncologist in Atlanta who was a research physician. And I am almost 80 years old and I do 30 pushups and 60 you know all that jazz during the day and then you run 400 steps in between each one and so it's quite vigorous.

Crosby: That's impressive.

Tonkel: Yeah, that's not 400 steps between each exercise, each 400 steps in all. And I asked my doctors about that there is a tidbit, a strangeness about that. This is the side that is affected and I can do everything without hurting very much except sit ups, and sit ups pull. He explained to me how it is all attached together. I write. I do a lot of writing you know and my blog which appeared here at the church and at least three people read it every morning. Jim Young, who was our

pastoral assistant at that time said let me put it on Face Book and I said well I don't know anything about Face Book and he said well let me do it. The first one, 54,000 people read it and now it runs around 2500 a day! So it's a big responsibility. It's about an hour and a half commitment every day but the discipline has been good for me and particularly when I am not able to be in the office as I used to be.

Crosby: I read your little Christmas story about Carol LaGuardia shortly before I came over here.

Tonkel: It's a good story isn't it?

Crosby: It is. You like to get your text from a variety of different places?

Tonkel: From a variety of different places. It basically moves like this. I'll say to myself, what in the world are you going to write on tomorrow and I can't think of anything and usually in the afternoon or evening something will come to mind and I'll do it. Sometimes I research stuff. I'll look here and there and everywhere. I didn't expect it to be a continuing thing but it's been a very meaningful thing particularly during the period when I couldn't talk at all. I don't know if y'all noticed it but there is a little sign out there that they have renamed the street for me.

Crosby: Oh really!

Tonkel: Yeah. The City Council was going to do it and they do that very often and I said please don't change the name of the street. I said if you want to do something just think of a way to do it, but please don't change the name of the street. So anyway, they called and they said you see the little blue sign out there right at the corner, To Designate and Honor or something it says. That was the Keith Tonkel Way or something like that.

Crosby: Is that integral you think to your faith and your pastoral sense of needing to speak, talk, and communicate?

Tonkel: Yeah.

Crosby: It's not a solitary thing.

Tonkel: No it's not a solitary thing to me. In fact it's a both/and thing because it requires the solitary to do the verbal. Not be able to speak is very hard when that is the definition of who you are you know. And I didn't expect them to listen at all. They listen more carefully because they have to. One of the ladies said she liked it because I sounded more like Clint Eastwood! And last week one of the guys said you know you imitate Louis Armstrong when you sing now you sound like him all the time. My Daddy sat in on a group with Louis and introduced a young lady who had not sung in New Orleans before, Mahalia Jackson.

Crosby: Really?

Tonkel: Yeah. A long time ago.

Crosby: I knew of Mahalia from listening to Studs Terkel in Chicago when in I was in graduate school.

Tonkel: Daddy had something to do with Studs. I don't know what but I remember that name.

Crosby: Yeah.

Tonkel: I think they were just friends or something but I don't know. We are trying to find a whole covey of pictures that we had. We know they are in the house but of Daddy's big bands. My oldest daughter found them once and she could never find them again. And afterwards my wife, Pat had curious storage in places. So we are still looking.

Crosby: Can we go back to this notion of inclusiveness.

Tonkel: Sure.

Crosby: In reaching out and accepting all of God's children to the community. Is that something that came, you think, strictly as a theological exploration or did it have something to do with your experiences as a child living in New Orleans or on the coast or your school? Were there people that were influential in that approach to ministry?

Tonkel: It's a lovely question because I don't think anybody comes up with any position in life without the influence of others. But Mama, despite the fact that she

was from big society in New Orleans, learned from Daddy the world of the street. So the two of them coalesced in an amazing way. So Mama was considered very progressive in that maids were never treated like maids. We never had a maid but she had friends who were maids and so when we would have lunch or something she would just invite them over which was unheard of at that time because they were friends. So I would have to say that. And my Dad, in a lot of ways, was much more conservative about class and society. But across the years I think probably from Mom's influence and his own personal growth. And it had something to do with my ministry too, change his mind completely he said. Anyway, when I told him I was going into the ministry, he said my God there is no future in that.

Crosby: That sounds like what the minister would say to the musician.

Tonkel: Yeah. That's about right. I would say definitely that others influenced that. Early on in Millsaps and at seminary I realized that in God's thinking, as I understand God's thinking, the door is open to whomever. So I am committed to whosoever and to whomever that want to come. Where I am a little different from some people is I am not interested in focusing in on any one group/class. And I am not interested in the political dimensions of it. I'm interested in specifically in the relational and spiritual dimensions that come from the God who loves everybody and calls us to try to love everybody. You know so that I'm not nearly liberal enough for some people. And not nearly conservative enough for others. I'm not interested in name tags. I'm interested, you know, in trying to find some authenticity for life.

Crosby: When you were at Millsaps, I assume Millsaps at that time was segregated.

Tonkel: Yeah. Millsaps was much less of a school for rich kids then, than it is now. But yeah I don't think I can remember any African-Americans. We had very few Asian students. We had a couple of Korean kids that I remember and one Chinese. I think that was about the inclusiveness in those days.

Crosby: It's interesting most of the Koreans I know are Presbyterian.

Tonkel: Yeah. My son and I were on a ship year before last, couldn't go last year but we offered a little worship service which they never have and we had 20 people and 18 were Koreans. Yeah, they were Korean Methodist.

Crosby: Well we have some friends from Korea and they always say if you want to find a Korean community in any city just go to the Presbyterian Church.

Tonkel: How about that. That's neat.

Crosby: The position of the Methodist Church on race was certainly contentious in Mississippi and yet you know some of the founding fathers of Methodism were very early in their critique of racism and the slave trade for example. John Wesley wrote a book, "Thoughts Upon Slavery" in 1774 I believe and was that ever referenced?

Tonkel: Yes. It was always referenced. The reality was the difficulty was between the actual and the ideal. In the ideal you had the discussions and talks of justice for everybody. In the actual you had to deal with changing social patterns and cultural understandings and in a lot of cases very specific, I can't speak for other branches of the church, but very specific preaching environments where you know God created some people to be here and some people to be there and you don't dare overcome that kind of thing. And that God created us to be separate but equal and all that kind some of that stuff was preached in those days but I never bought any of that because I knew it wasn't true. That was a part of what made it more difficult and after the Born of Conviction came out it's interesting because people were supplied with business size cards with our names on the cards with a little paragraph saying "Don't ever ask these people into your church". It's kind of a funny thing, not a funny thing a God thing because in the last 15 years I have ended up preaching at every single one of those churches.

Crosby: Is that right?

Tonkel: Yeah. Either a preaching mission or a conference or revival or something like that you know.

Crosby: So you take that as a sign of progress?

Tonkel: I take it as a sign of progress. I believe there has been distinct progress. I think recent experiences with Ferguson and New York and all that indicate that we have a long way to go but boy I remember when restaurants and rest rooms and schools, I mean there was no openness at all. A lot of young people from all of our communities take those things for granted and some people paid dearly for that. One of the ways that I am a little unusual from the other members of the 28 and they are all great people but I'm much less interested in rehashing that. You know when they have conferences and all to do that and all, I try to go to say hello but I am more concerned about what we have to do here and now because that is what we had to do there and then. So I don't know maybe since I was among those who stayed; I've think there were three or four of us who stayed. Somebody said no that's not true that I was the only one but I don't think that is accurate but what I have noticed is that those who left are much more inclined to want to talk about it and I don't know what that means because I mean they were bold to do that at that time and they are all people of integrity. Only one of them, and I would never name him. Only one of them said to us in our meeting, I am too ambitious to stay here and he said I just need to go somewhere else.

Crosby: I got the impression from some things that I have read that probably none or at least very few of the 28 were actively involved in civil rights.

Tonkel: Prior to that? Yeah.

Crosby: I almost got the feeling that they might have been a little naïve. You said a moment ago that you didn't want to sign until they would assure you they would stay in Mississippi.

Tonkel: Yeah.

Crosby: And you thought that maybe they were grabbing a tiger by the tail that they would have to let go of.

Tonkel: I definitely.

Crosby: They were not as aware of that as you, do you think?

Tonkel: I think naiveté is a good word because I think that they thought that it was too mild to create a climate that it did. I knew from experience that almost any

vocal or written kind of a statement about that elicited a great deal of response. No, I had a shotgun in my face and tires slashed and stuff like that all which are interesting stories. That is history. The shotgun thing was interesting. A guy from the Klan came by and.

Crosby: Where was this happening?

Tonkel: At Guinn Church, yeah. He walked up to the front door. He had a 1950 model Ford. I remember that distinctly. Two door sedan black but anyway he came up and I was counseling with a guy who had been the wizard for the Klan and he changed his mind. He just realized how wrong he was and he went out there and took the gun away from the man and ran him off. That was a long time ago. There were consequences that we went through at the time but the difference, maybe the difference between me and the others, I can't speak for them but maybe the difference is that I expected them, I didn't want them, I didn't look forward to them but I don't think they did. Some of the ones left, that left, left for maybe the noblest cause of all; they were scared for their families. And at that time you know I was not married. I had foster kids but I wasn't a daddy or a husband.

Crosby: It seems to me if you are fresh out of an academic environment and you are used to debate of issues like that. You perhaps lose the sense of how committed to a particular position some people can be and will not tolerate it being discussed the opposite. The opposite being discussed.

Tonkel: I think that is true. I was very active in debate at Millsaps. Millsaps is the only college that we know of in debate when you walked into the door of the debate you would be a part of that day, that's when you found out what side you would be debating. They handed you an envelope. When you sat at the desk you opened it up to find out because they said unless you look at both sides with equal vigor (is that the word?) you can't really understand the nature of a serious debate. So that was good.

Crosby: But you have, by in large, eschewed political action in favor of personal witness.

Tonkel: Personal witness. Relational experience. You know get to know people as people, not of color or whatever. Because that is true. People think that we do

too little, to which I respond, we do what we do and that's what we are going to do and so you do what you need to. You know. What we have found is that when you enter into an environment of where for spiritual and/or theological reasons you choose to relate to people as persons and that has a more lasting power to change than getting involved with movements. On the other hand movements have to be a part. For example, for years, this will be the first time in since it's begun, that I won't be in the Martin Luther King parade. Our son is taking me on a surprise cruise for my birthday which he finally had to tell me about. But for the longest time we were the only white presence or light skin presence in that. At first, it was not fun because people were not very glad to see us but we felt it was still the right thing to do. So it's at that point where relational and theological commitment touches the edge of political understandings and all. Now what is so neat about is they will say oh yeah that is Wells! You know that means a lot to me. Another thing, just a little thing, and it may sound strange but it's a little thing. I don't allow, as far as I am in charge; it gets pretty pandemonium in the middle of a parade, for us to throw anything to anybody. We have a philosophy of the parade which is that we bring the beads to the oldest people first or the infirm and we give the Martin Luther King bookmarks to people but it's a hand to hand, you know. So again, it's an attempt to make that relational thing happen. So now it is we have people go by and I have been here so long and because we have preach between 100 to 200 people every Tuesday when they come for the clinics and the food and stuff. We go down the street and you know every other person says hey Keith or you know whoever hey from the church because they know us. That was the philosophy of staying is the root of our effectiveness as inclusive in terms of the neighborhood was concerned because they; a guy actually came to me and said if you would learn to sign your name with a felt pen and move to one of the suburbs you would have a church from 3 to 5,000 people in no time at all and I said thank you very much that is an interesting thought.

Crosby: By the way, I am missing something.

Tonkel: Yeah.

Crosby: What is the significance of a felt pen?

Tonkel: It's bold.

Crosby: Oh!

Tonkel: It's bold. Makes you look bold and my pens are too skinny. But it is interesting because that was a clergy person too, years later I asked him to come over here once and do a Wednesday night thing when I was going to be gone and he did good. You know what he said? It's very simple. He said you know what Keith? I said what? He said your staying was right. And I said, (I almost called his name and I am not going to do that) I said no, you got that wrong. I said "our" staying was right. There may have been a difference if I had said "We" stayed, that is different. So that was the nice thing and he saw that.

Crosby: Well you, in these leaner days, have become, and maybe you always were, a bit of a celebrity.

Tonkel: Oh mercy!

Crosby: In terms of your connection with staying with certain positions in Mississippi through times when it was difficult.

Tonkel: Yeah.

Crosby: Does that ever concern you?

Tonkel: It only concerns me.

Crosby: If you begin to feel it?

Tonkel: No, if I represented it correctly.

Crosby: I see.

Tonkel: You know it would be if I took an approach of representing a need in an arrogant or egocentric way of doing things and I would be very uncomfortable with it. If it is something that you have to do and it's a price to pay then I am willing to do it. I'm not one of these anxious heroes. I'm one of these people that very often is scared to death when I do what I have to do but I have to do it and I do it and it costs us, you know. In recent times we have lost some of our members over some of our positions over several things and none of those losses are incidental to me. I have never been like you don't agree with this so the heck with you! It's a heartbreaker but on the other hand, you can function beyond your own integrity

and mean anything to anybody. So we move on. Now right now my frustration is with all my treatment and stuff I have much less energy and time to be able to devote to the church but the trade off on that is I have spent 45 plus years here saying "I'm not the church, you are the church" and they are being it you know. They are doing it. So the hope with anybody with long term energy and I never intended to stay long. I just thought I would be just like every other Methodist whenever the Bishop moved you. But the tradeoff is we have had a chance to develop a strong, strong lay leadership and I hope that it will continue to be so. One little other funny thing was, Max Stokes one of the Bishops here, one of the bigger churches here asked me to come be their pastor and he was talking to the group. In our church we call it the cabinet. It's all the District Superintendents which in the Roman Church, like the Auxiliary Bishop and he says such and such church wants Keith and I never know what to do with that boy! So, maybe that's why I have been here for a long time. I have been here because I wanted to be here and I have asked to stay. Right now the delicacy is do I need to stay and at what time, if they don't ask me, for me to leave? Both health issues and common sense say it is time to go. So that is where we are these days.

Crosby: So when you arrived here at Wells, did you, you didn't really feel that you would be here for life?

Tonkel: No.

Crosby: But did you have any long, short, medium term plans for how to organize your ministry?

Tonkel: People who function in that dimension, I am a real loss because I have never asked like what I am I going to do in five, ten or fifteen years. What I asked is what am I supposed to do today? What am I supposed to do now? So it's kind of funny, when you said you came here; what's strange about it was, at the time my wife with me had a U-Haul vans behind us, two of them, thought we were going to a church on the other end of town. So we pulled in right to the parsonage where we raised our children and we said well gosh we didn't know we were coming here but we knew that it was a changing neighborhood. We knew that the church had lost a numbers of people. We knew that the church could not pay me a salary when we came here. The Bishop could not legally appointment me to this

church until they could pay a minimal salary and so they let me come on a contingency. So we came here that way and from the beginning we had very, very few people. From the very first day I was here I sat with the officials from Operation Shoestring, which began here, for us to talk about how we can become more inclusive because at that point Shoestring's singular commitment was to open the door to the African-American community. So we had to deal officially in the church early on with the question of whether or not we are going to be an open congregation. We voted to continue the work with Shoestring by the majority won and I felt they could vote every year after that because I wanted them to have the right and there was never an opposing vote again.

Crosby: This is all the way back in '69?

Tonkel: '69, yeah.

Crosby: I didn't realize that Shoestring had been around for that long.

Tonkel: Yeah. It was begun there. Interesting that you would say that because Nancy Gilbert became the Director then and I just wrote her Christmas card this morning. Yeah, early this morning.

Crosby: Well I'll be.

Tonkel: Yeah Shoestring was in the building for years. Then outgrew our facility.

Crosby: Did you ever feel that your Mother's status as a debutante gave you entrée to certain circles in Mississippi society that another preacher might not have had?

Tonkel: There is no question that Mama's status and life gave me tools but we were too poor to be a part of that kind of world. Like for example yesterday was my best friend of life's birthday and for 69 years we have called on birthdays! We are both 79 now and he was from a family that had the money and he would open doors for me to be a part of things but where Mama's influence came was I could walk into any environment knowing how to act, knowing how to talk, knowing what to do and to make it even more interesting my Grandfather, for whom, I am named, Keith Sawyer, was Mom's stepdaddy. The only father she ever knew. Her Daddy died while she was still in womb and so my Grandmother who I used to say was a mean woman, was actually an ill woman as I look back; gave Granddaddy a

heck of a time of it. Granddaddy was a member of the Privy Council for George VI. So he taught me everything about high, high society. I can remember one time going to Lese Courier which is one of the big balls in New Orleans and knowing which spoon to use first, and which fork to use first and all that kind of jazz. It was kind of funny so yeah I would say Mom's life and Mom and Daddy's commitment to education was very helpful. Even though they hadn't had much. Mama was too much of a rebel to take advantage of the family's money for education but she did finish at Gulf Park. So she would have had what we call a Junior College. My father had the equivalent of a third grade education in German. He wouldn't have learned how to read. The only people who would teach him were a group of Christians called the Plymouth Rock Church and they were all German speaking and he learned to read and he was perhaps the most passionate reader in later years. My friend, Penny, who's birthday was yesterday; her Daddy went to Dartmouth and Harvard and all that kind of stuff and my Daddy and he took a Civil Service exam and my Daddy got a much better score than he did! So my Daddy was self-educated but just consumed by wanting to learn. Mom was educated to the point that satisfy what you want to do which was basically to have a good time! I could write a book just on Mama's experiences. Once and this is not relevant to this but I'll say it real quickly was she was supposed to be in Europe with her sister which another whole story but anyway and her mother knowing my Mama's behavior as a rebel made Mama write a postcard from every place they stopped Brussels and all you know. So Grandma got postcards from Mama and The Times Picayune came out one morning and there was a picture on the front page of a roller coaster in Houston that stalled on top of the highest of whatever you call the rollercoaster thing, and a picture of my Mama and her boyfriend. She was in Houston the whole time but she had written all the letters. She had written all the letters for her sister to send and so she got in real bad trouble.

Crosby: That was elaborate rouse.

Tonkel: Yes it was an elaborate rouse! Now that sister, Eileen Richter Stevens, was a linguist and a very well-known one. She was asked when Israel became a state to be one of the ones that read the new document establishing it as a real state.

Crosby: So do you think your Mother's flouting of convention became a part of your make up as well?

Tonkel: Yeah, in the sense that Mama and I never, never intend to flout convention. We attempted to sort of live what we felt was our conviction. It was more of the in fleshing out of conviction than the flaunting of connection. Mama was a little bit more of a flouter than I am but she lived a long life and as a legacy of inclusiveness that really is wonderful. It really is wonderful. Racial inclusiveness, theological inclusiveness. Almost everything you can imagine that was a nice legacy for her to leave.

Crosby: It sounds as if it was, how to say this; it wasn't so much an ideology, as a living of perception.

Tonkel: Yeah, the kind of perception you are prompted by what you believe but you choose how to live that out and you can live it out by flaunting the political structure and trying to get involved in that or you can just do it on a one to one relationship in the places where you are and there is a difference. Because one is more specific in relational and the other is more public. I was saying earlier before yall came in during the SALT Treaties when Carter was President I was invited to go to one and Thad Cochran was on our Board here at Shoestring in early years and I guess that is how it happened. I never did know how I got the invitation but I went and when we were going from the conference either to the East Room to the Gold Wing or something like that where we were going for refreshments. Hodding Carter stopped me and he said you realize the President reads your article every week in the newspaper. I said really and he said yeah. But he doesn't read it anymore. I said well did I offend him? He said no. I said the subscription ran out. He said you need to tell Bill Minor to send that one for free. That was a good story!

Crosby: And I'm sure Bill complied.

Tonkel: Oh he did comply. He did.

THE END.