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ACTIVITIES IN COBB COUNTY, GEORGIA***

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INTERVIEW WITH TIMOTHY HOUSTON, SR.

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CONDUCTED BY CLAUDIA ZIBANAJADRAD AND WILLIAM WALKER

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Cobb NAACP/Civil Rights Series, No. 6
Interview with Timothy Houston, Sr.
Conducted by Claudia Zibanejadrad and William Walker
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CLAUDIA ZIBANAJADRAD: First I'm going to ask your name.

TIM HOUSTON: Lawrence Timothy Houston, Sr.

CZ: What years did you go to the Roberts School?

TH: My last year there was 1968. I went through the 4th grade.

CZ: So you would have started in 1964?

TH: Yes.

CZ: How did you like going to the Roberts School?

TH: I loved going to the Roberts School.

CZ: So you didn't think of it as being an inferior school to the white school? To Acworth Elementary?

TH: No, because we had nothing to compare it to. That was all I knew, and according to some of the stories told to me by my mother about their school, this was an excellent school.

CZ: What school did she go to?

TH: She went to a little school called Blue Springs. It was located below town on 293 in Acworth. The school was just a little, one-room shack. It was probably a barn or something given to them to use as a school.

CZ: Okay, so it was just somebody in the neighborhood gave an old building or something that they had and everybody went to it?

TH: Yes.

CZ: How far is that from here?

TH: Approximately two miles.

CZ: So it was too far for them to walk to go to the Rosenwald School or any of those?

TH: No, actually she lived in that area, near Acworth Due West and Nance Road. A few years ago, there used to be a whole house there. They tore it down to build a subdivision. Prior to them tearing the house down, I took my mother there to revisit it. Since it was where she was raised.

CZ: Could you walk into the city and go to the Rosenwald School?

TH: Yes. They used to walk to town.

CZ: So when you went to the Roberts School you were comparing it to that school rather than to Acworth Elementary. When you went to the Roberts School, did you like your teachers? Did you consider them good teachers?

TH: Yes, I liked my teachers. As a child I viewed some of them was mean, but they were really good teachers. We had a couple of special ones, for instance, Ms. Taylor and were named Ms. Neely. Ms Neely, she taught the older grades, seventh and eighth graders and Ms. Taylor taught second grade.

CZ: And that's N-e-e-l-e-y?

TH: I don't know.

CZ: Too long ago?

TH: Yes, it has been a long time ago. I think she had been one of the original teachers from the Rosenwald School because everybody knew her. She was the tough/good teacher. She was probably about five feet tall. You had to learn in her class.

CZ: Do you know what kind of training she had? Do you know how she was educated?

TH: No.

CZ: Did she teach all the different subjects or did she just teach certain ones?

TH: Most of the teachers taught every subject. We didn't change classes as they do today; therefore, we had the same teacher for the entire time & entire grade level. In the fourth grade, my teacher's name was Ms. Brown and she was real special, I used to sit by her desk.

CZ: Why did you have to sit by her desk?

TH: Because I was the teacher's pet and I talked a lot. Two-fold I guess.

CZ: So why did you think she was a great teacher if she made you sit by her desk?

TH: Well, she was nice and she was pretty. [laughter]

CZ: That made her special.

TH: That made her special.

CZ: Do you remember any particular events about the Roberts School?

TH: Yes, when we first went there, the principal was named Mr. Hardin. There was a little café down the street from the school, they would send him a box of cookies, and he would eat cookies and carrots all the time. That was his specialty. After he left, a principal named Mr. Dyson. Mr. Dyson wasn't too popular at the beginning because he was new; any time you get a new teacher, you know.

CZ: D-y-s-o-n?

TH: I have no idea.

CZ: They never made you write their name down?

TH: No, not really.

CZ: So he wasn't from the Acworth area?

TH: No, none of the teachers was.

CZ: Really?

TH: Ms. Taylor was from Kennesaw. That's the only one I can remember. Most of them were from Atlanta.

CZ: Do you know how they ended up in Acworth?

TH: No.

CZ: Maybe saw an advertisement for work and came in.

TH: I have no idea. I guess they advertised for teachers because Roberts School was the only elementary school in the area.

CZ: They were bussed in or did they have to get their own transportation?

TH: The ones from Kenensaw were bussed in. The ones that lived in Acworth, even as far out as Glade Road and 75, they had to walk.

CZ: The teachers that were coming from outside, did they eventually move to Acworth or they just drove in and drove home?

TH: Just drove. I never remember one teacher living actually in Acworth.

CZ: So you had lunch cooked at the Roberts school.

TH: Everyday.

CZ: And ate there. I saw a gym so I assume you had gym class.

TH: We didn't have a gym. There was a cafetorium, where you had a stage in the cafeteria we played outside. We actually had playground equipment. It's still over at one of the playgrounds. They don't use it any more because it's a little outdated.

CZ: It's at one of the parks around here?

TH: Yes. The playground is located near the Durr Field. It is adjacent to the Acworth Housing on School Street. There was not a gym, just a metal playground with a couple of basketball goals, usually no nets. We would run on the asphalt when playing basketball.

CZ: What happened if it rained?

TH: You didn't go outside.

CZ: What did the teachers do with you?

TH: Assigned work.

CZ: Oh, so you just didn't get a break at all.

TH: Right.

CZ: And what subjects did you like the best?

TH: None particularly. I was an A student, but I didn't really like school because you was confined. We couldn't get out and run around. I guess I wasn't a school person.

CZ: So the teachers kept you busy enough to make you have an A?

TH: Yes, but mostly the parents did. I couldn't bring bad grades home. Back then, the teacher could whip you in school, and if you received a whipping in school that would follow, you home and you'd get another whipping. It was like that throughout the neighborhood; everybody took on the part of disciplining the youth and ensuring they stayed on the right track.

CZ: Did they have a PTA at that school?

TH: Not that I'm aware of.

CZ: So they didn't have PTA meetings for the parents to come in and voice their problems.

TH: No, the parents didn't have any problems. You went to school to learn and you learned, otherwise, you were disciplined.

CZ: How did that change when you went to Acworth Elementary?

TH: Well, it changed because we didn't know anybody. It wasn't as bad as we thought it was going to be. It was still a big difference, because the school was bigger and it had a gym. They also had a ceramic class; we didn't have any of that. I recall when I first went over there, the teacher I had was Ms. Copeland. I was in the fifth grade. She was a good teacher. They had to actually make room for us. Our classroom was not located inside the building, it was in a little room behind the gym. I think they put three classes out there.

CZ: In trailers?

TH: No, not trailers, it was a brick building. It was a part of the school used for art.

CZ: Tell me what you were thinking the summer before you started at that school? What was going on in your mind when you would think about going to school?

TH: I was a little apprehensive, because of listening to the T.V. and hearing the news and all that was going on around that time. It didn't appear to be happening in Acworth, but it was happening around so you just didn't know what to expect. This left you scared to death when you go over there. We went anyway and had a pretty pleasant experience but it wasn't like Roberts. You didn't get the attention that you got at Roberts.

CZ: Did you still get spanked?

TH: No, never got a spanking at that school.

CZ: And that went up to seventh grade?

TH: Acworth? It went through the sixth.

CZ: So you were there for three years.

TH: Two years. Fifth and sixth grade. Then I went to Awtrey. Awtrey was consider junior high. It hosted 7th through 9th grades. I played basketball at Awtrey, which made it a little better. I guess you just begin to blend, but it still wasn't the same. At Roberts School, we always started the day with church songs like Amazing Grace or some other spiritual song, we had prayer, and then we would do the Pledge of Allegiance, prior to starting our class work. That was everyday. When we went to Acworth we didn't do

that. We would just do the Pledge of Allegiance, so that was a big, big difference. I think that with integration, it started to change the culture and I'm going to be blunt, right, okay?

CZ: I don't get offended easily. I'll put it that way. Go ahead.

TH: Okay, I hope so. I don't want to offend anybody. I was taken out of my environment and put in a very different environment, one that I really didn't like. Most of the time you take someone out of their environment, they would adapt and some would lose themselves and just don't care no more. Then some get to the point where they tried to adapt too quickly or they tried to adapt and just totally forget where they came from. We had a lot of that because when we started going to school with the white kids their morals was different than ours. Then you slowly begin to just do away with a culture and I think that happened.

CZ: Did your parents have a problem with that, if they felt like you were becoming too much adapting to their ways? Did they smack you around a little bit and say, "you're getting too ...?"

TH: No.

CZ: Weren't there some mills around here? Had they closed by then?

TH: There were some mills; I can not remember most of them. One was over near the old mill.

CZ: It's turned into a restaurant now?

TH: The Old Mill was a flour mill back then. However, there is an old building adjacent to the old mill that used to be a knitting mill. I tried constantly to get a job at that mill. Unfortunately, I had no success. They would always hire my white friends. They would come back and tell me to go fill out an application because the mill was hiring, but each time, I was always told they were not hiring. Then a couple weeks later, another one of my friends got hired.

CZ: The white friends?

TH: Yes.

CZ: So did you have a lot of white friends?

TH: Yes.

CZ: Did you have white friends before you went to Acworth?

TH: Yes. I remember Torel King, he grew up right down the street here. Leslie, I can't remember Leslie's last name. Don Brooks; I had a lot of them. We played together when we got out of school but we went our own separate ways with Roberts school. All the kids—everybody pretty much got along in the community.

CZ: You never saw any Klan members around or anything like that in Acworth?

TH: Not real ones. [laughter] When we were at North Cobb, we had Grub Day.

CZ: What's that?

TH: Grub Day is when you come dressed all - they may call it something different now.

CZ: Oh, you could be like really causal?

TH: You could dress anyway. We would wear costumes.

CZ: Kind of like Halloween?

TH: I guess you could say that. We had one guy come to school dressed as a Klan and that caused a fight that day.

CZ: There was a fight about that?

TH: Yes.

CZ: Did they get called to the office for it?

TH: Yes.

CZ: And sent home?

TH: Yes. The ones that was fighting too. Everybody did. At North Cobb, it was integrated but segregated. I mean, you know, you went to school together, but you still socialized with your "kind". We had a place at North Cobb at the end of the hall where all the blacks would stand every morning. Every morning, we would do that and it was mean but we would do that to intimidate the white kids that would come through. A lot of them wouldn't come through, they'd go all the way around the hall to do that. We weren't a threat, we weren't going to do nothing, we just watched. It was like watch this; it was how different we were from them. We'd stand there and they wouldn't even come our way.

CZ: Kind of like "let's see if we can make them go around"?

TH: Yes. And quite a few did. It was mean but I wouldn't do that now.

CZ: You've got some questions?

WILLIAM WALKER: This is going back a little bit but what was your first job?

TH: My first job. Concrete.

WW: Concrete.

TH: Yeah, construction. I worked for my brother-in-law at the time he had his own business. He took me to work with him one summer and I made \$15.00.

WW: All summer.

TH: Yeah.

CZ: What happened?

TH: He fired me. I think I was probably about twelve.

CZ: Oh, you were young.

TH: Yeah, but he was paying us a dollar an hour and so we worked a couple of days. The last day me and the other guy, he was a little younger than I was, we was just playing and we knocked over this guy's cooler and wasted all his water. At that point, my brother-in-law no longer needed us. That was my first job. It wasn't a real job but I made \$15.00 and I was able to buy two pair of pants, two shirts and two pair of shoes. It was pretty nice.

WW: Wow. Did you have any sort of formal education after you got out of high school?

TH: No. I quit school

WW: They quitted you?

TH: When I was seventeen, I was going to be a father. I was trying to get on the CVAE program.

WW: What is that?

TH: It is a program that allowed students to go to school half days and work the other half. Unfortunately, this was only being offered to juniors and seniors and I was only a sophomore.

CZ: Where'd you go to school when you went back?

TH: North Metro Tech.

CZ: Okay.

TH: I went to North Metro Technical College for my GED and a certificate as a Security Installer. Then years later I obtained a bachelors degree in Divinity Studies at The Sure Fountain Theological Institute, this was an online school. I have a church in the community.

WW: What is that?

TH: Joshua Gospel Tabernacle.

WW: I've got a few things. I'm going to go way back now. What year did you say you finished at Roberts school?

TH: 1968.

WW: 1968. Then, you went to Acworth Elementary.

TH: Yes.

WW: Did you go to Acworth Elementary by choice?

TH: No, we did not have a choice, they closed our school. Well, you had a choice the year before because they integrated I think with the '66-'67 school year and they told your parents that if they wanted to, you could go that year. We did have three students who chose to go early. Most of us hung around there a year longer and actually that was the year that Dr. King was assassinated.

CZ: What were your thoughts when Dr. King was assassinated?

TH: I don't remember a whole lot. All I remember is that my mom. She used to iron clothes for a living and she was ironing and I was sitting on the floor. I remember a news flash came on the TV and said Dr. King (had been assassinated). My mother just hollered and cried and got on the phone. She called her sister and was saying, "They killed him, they killed him." In fact, Ms. Brown, our schoolteacher went to the funeral and we have to watch it in school on TV. We sat there, everybody watching. It was something to see the reaction of everybody else - we knew it was devastating. It changed a whole lot. Many people were mad, really mad.

CZ: There weren't any incidences in town, though, as a result of it?

TH: No, none that I remember.

CZ: Any more questions?

WW: I guess I can ask a few about today. What's your position as far as in the Acworth city council?

TH: Actually, Acworth calls them Aldermen but it's the same as a councilmen, just a different name. I've been on the council for five years now, going into my next four-year term beginning November 3, 2009.

WW: Just out of curiosity, have you been doing anything as far as race relations are concerned in Acworth with that? I mean, I guess my question is, is there still anything going on concerning any type of race relations in the city?

TH: Well, that's a tough question; both factual and unfounded.

CZ: Are you talking about racial issues or drug issues or what?

TH: Both.

CZ: Well, as Acworth has become more diverse. It used to be just black and white and everybody was Protestant and now you're getting different colors, different religions coming in, do you think everybody gets along pretty well?

TH: Yes, I think they do. We've all moved up. It has become very diverse, which is a good thing. I used to know every black person that lived in Acworth. Now there are a lot of faces I do not know, when I see them "who are you?" I think it's real diverse and we still don't have a whole lot of black/white issue or diversity issues.

CZ: I assume that at that time the police department was all white?

TH: We had one black police officer.

CZ: About what time period was this?

TH: It had to be the late '60's. We actually had Randolph Blalock as a police officer before he decided to quit the force. Walter Johnson was another black police officer, he stayed on the longest. He was the only black police officer for years but then they hired another guy and I can't remember his name. He was from Marietta. He was run out of Acworth. He didn't have a police car, he used to drive an old city pick up truck and he would ride through the community. He was one of those police officers that would just bother you for no reason and some of the men in the community grew tired of it and made leave the community.

CZ: White men or black men?

TH: Black men. He got in the truck. I have never seen the man since.

CZ: Did the black police officers, did they give tickets and so forth to white people or did they just send him into the black community?

- TH: No, not at first, the black officers only gave tickets to the black community.
- CZ: So if he gave someone a ticket that was white then somebody on the city council or somebody higher up would get a call?
- TH: Now, I don't know about that. He would basically just hang out in the black community. That changed over the years. He was there for a long time. Acworth police department have very few black officers still to date. I do not know why that is now but maybe that is something we need to work on. As far as the police department now, I think we have one of the best police departments we have had in years.

I got involved in politics during the time the housing authority wanted to take down the basketball goal near the housing on School Street. Everyday, when we got out of school or when you got off work, we would go to the basketball court and play basketball until dark - everybody. That was everyday. Then one day some of the elder residents living in the housing started complaining about the noise level. The goals were removed and we were upset. We were told by the housing that it was the city's property, and then by the city that it was the housing property. So, when they done that, that is when I started coming to the council meetings and complaining. No one wanted to take ownership. So I'd come to the council meetings and telling them that we needed the basketball court because there was nothing for the kids to do, there were no recreation center or aquatic center - nothing; other than to hang on the street corner and that's basically what you ended up doing. So we fought for years to get another basketball court and then when they came and built one for us, it was located at the very end of the Durr field in an area infested by mosquitoes. It was awful, it was really awful.

So needless to say, I complained about that and one thing lead to another. The police started acting up, and I started complaining about the police. I was always a fixture at the council meetings. So I mean, I complained a lot, I didn't let anything go. But I was fair. I remember one time the police stopped me and gave me a ticket - I ran a red light. I was on the way to the hospital and I ran a red light and the guy came up to the car. He was real cordial and very nice and gave me the ticket – “yes sir, no sir”. Of course, I didn't have time to deal with it; I ran the red light so I got the ticket. I came to the council meeting and as soon as I got to the microphone to talk, I could see the city the person holding his head because I started out by saying “I got pulled over by one of your police officers.” And they said, “Oh, here we go again”. I told them, “He was real polite, real nice and I just wanted to commend him on that. I am one to try to be fair. I complain if they do wrong but if they do right, I'll tell you.” Well, you could see the sigh of relief on their faces. But that is the way I am. If I feel the need to complain about you doing something unjust, I am also going to let you know when you are doing good.

- CZ: You were talking about recreation for the black kids. When Acworth Beach opened up in the '50s and '60s, could blacks and whites go to Acworth Beach or was that segregated also?
- TH: I can't answer that. I know we had our "own" beach.

CZ: I'm not saying that it's not segregated by the city but maybe segregated by you?

TH: Yes, we did. We had our own beach called George Washington Carver, it was at Red Top and it was nice. It was a real nice facility and I remember we used to sit around the porch at my mom's. We lived right up from Cherokee Street and that was the only way through, I-75 wasn't here then and that was the only way people come from Atlanta and Marietta, to get to Red Top Mountain. We would sit there on Sundays and you could count the vehicles, it would be ten or fifteen chartered buses. That is when we seen actual black people in real nice cars. They would come in their nice cars like a convoy going to the beach, going to George Washington Carver. That was every Sunday; people coming from all over. That was the only black beach in the area. You go out there and they had a huge hall, they had a kitchen and a big dance floor and then you had the beach where you would swim. It was really nice.

CZ: It had like a restaurant there or just a picnic area?

TH: Not really. They cooked in it. They cooked you hot dogs, hamburgers. Whatever you wanted, they cooked it and sold it. They had the jukebox and every now and then, they would have a band, I mean, it was huge.

CZ: Did you ever hitch a ride to the beach?

TH: Yeah, all the time.

CZ: But you guys never went to the Acworth Beach right here in town?

TH: Later on when they closed (George Washington Carver).

CZ: They closed that about the same time as they segregated the schools?

TH: I don't know. Well, they didn't actually close it down, they changed the name to Bartow County and then it was no longer the black beach. You had to get reservations to rent it and it turned out to be a special events hall or something. We used to go swimming at the (Acworth) beach, I remember because I had to walk. I didn't go a whole lot because I didn't want to carry a whole bunch of clothes. Then you come back with no shoes on. The asphalt is hot so you walk a little bit, get in the grass a little bit and then walk a little bit. But yeah, we used to swim over there. It was still rather segregated, you swimming over here and everybody else swimming over there. You didn't all mingle. I wasn't too fond of the water.

WW: Just looking back today, what do you think as far as integration, that was good that happened and maybe what do you think should have been done differently?

TH: That's' a tough question.

WW: Sorry.

TH: Y'all want me to be honest, right, you want my honest opinion.

WW: Oh yeah.

TH: I did not like it at the time.

CZ: So you think it should not have been integrated at all?

TH: That was my thought at the time. I mean, as far as I knew, we were getting along fine. It appeared that when integration took place, everything black went away. Prior to it, we had our own café and our own stores and to me that could have been built on. It made it twice as hard and I think integration contributed to that because blacks had to give up everything. Just think about it, even in Cobb County, none of the schools in Cobb County was named after an African American person. They did not have the opportunity to keep contributing to build their name so, to me, in that aspect it was damaging. At that time, I felt it was blowing away with my heritage. I know it's still up to me to keep it going but it's a lot tougher today, than if they'd just left it alone and then it would have built on its own. Then, you could have said, look what happened.

WW: Would you say that instead of being integrated it was more you were being assimilated into the white culture?

TH: Yeah, exactly. I could not put it better.

WW: Why did they say you have to go to Acworth Elementary and they did not say to anybody at Acworth Elementary you have to go to Roberts school?

TH: The white people wouldn't let that happen. They were not going to let their kids go into a black community. But it was a nice school; I mean it was a fairly new school at the time.

CZ: Newer than Acworth Elementary.

TH: Yeah, oh yeah.

CZ: Did you see a lot of your friends drop out of school after integration happened? Did you feel like a lot of the black kids started to drop out of school?

TH: Yes, in Acworth. We had a big dropout rate. You had some finish, but more so that didn't. I mean, that is still a bad statistic in Acworth now. That is what got me started on the Rosenwald School (Acworth Community Center). We had very few kids that would finish high school, let alone go to college. I was trying to change that. You know, if you look at Cartersville and you look at Marietta, Cartersville has so many college graduates and most of them from Tuskegee. I have a lot of friends that are graduates from Tuskegee.

CZ: Is that what you're doing with the Rosenwald school and the Roberts school now is to use it for tutoring for kids and so forth?

TH: Yes, the Roberts School, which was the whole idea behind it. The city and the community are doing well with a lot of programs. We have Acworth Achievers, the Expanding Horizon program from the city, as well as the A.C.O.R. (Acworth Community Outreach Revitalization program hosted by a citizen in Acworth. Now, still goes back to the parents, you have to get the parents to get the kids involved with it. That is a task within itself.

CZ: Is that being promoted in Acworth?

TH: Yes.

CZ: So people can hear about it?

TH: Yes. We used the Expanding Horizons through the schools. The school chooses the student. They have an average of seventy-five kids. They have been to places like the Renaissance Festival, the museum, King Center, Washington, just a lot of places they would not normally go. We have a private benefactor that donates this money to the city. He wanted it used specifically for that, for kids that otherwise would not have the opportunity to go to these places. He makes it happen. It helps, when the kids go. They have to do a pre-trip and post-trip. They have a folder they keep to tell what they learned, what they saw and all that stuff so they can obtain it.

CZ: Like a travel diary. Do you mind me asking if the benefactor is black or white?

TH: He's white.

CZ: So it is like another Rosenwald then.

TH: I never thought of that. Yeah.

CZ: So the Rosenwald school, they go there, is it open every afternoon for tutoring?

TH: Not now.

CZ: But you want to work towards that?

TH: The Rosenwald School is used more for events.

CZ: Oh, so now you have the Roberts school for after school tutoring, you don't need it?

TH: Yeah, see the Roberts school at the time was Acworth Public Works; they had the health department over there. When they closed the school down, public works moved in it. It had the health center - Cobb County Health Center- and they stayed in there for years.

Then, when they closed it down that was another battle of mine. Right before I got on the council, I would come in to council meetings to try to convince them to turn it into a recreation center but, of course, there was no money. In the meanwhile, I was working on the (Acworth Community Center) Rosenwald School to get it up and running. I was working with other citizens of the community and an organization called Neighborhood Cobb. A guy named Joe Brice, he got a grant from Emory and I found out later the grant was to study the behavior of black youth males. Nevertheless, we got money to start some programs. So I worked for them for a while part-time. We received computers and set it up where student could come there after school. It was not in the best of shape but it was working. I went and got grants from Home Depot and Jasper Lumber Company. Allstate foundation gave money to help kind of redo the Rosenwald School. Jasper gave the lumber that we needed and Allstate gave money, Home Depot gave money.

CZ: And then Lowe's gave a grant.

TH: Yes, the past year, that was the last grant received. It was \$50,000. It was substantial - they done a lot of work on the community center. I call it the community center. I was actually the president. After the work on the Community Center (Rosenwald School), the community was having a hard time keeping it up, financially. We called numerous meetings to see what options we had available to keep it up and preserved as history in the black community. Unfortunately, the financial responsibility was greater than anyone was able to take on; therefore, we decided to have the city take on the responsibility of continuing its preservation. At the beginning, I really only knew about the history of the Community Center as it related to the Black Community. Later, I learned of the history of it as an Old Rosenwald School. I was just trying to get a place for kids to go and then stumbled on the history. It has always been like the heartbeat of the community. To me, it is significant to the Acworth African-American history because they saved it. At the time, they did not know what they were saving, but they saved it because it was near and dear to them. We now have Bethel A.M.E. Church, the Rosenwald School (Acworth Community) and Zion Hill Baptist Church. Both churches are approximately 145 years old or older. We got a lot of history there, so to maintain those would be great.

CZ: Especially the AME church, it is starting to fall down.

TH: Yes, and I do not know how we can preserve it. Unlike the Baptist, which is independent, for AME one must go through the bishop, the elders.

CZ: Any questions? No. Okay, I'm going to stop it.

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