

**RG53.1 History of Wake Forest University Oral History Project
Special Collections & Archives, Z. Smith Reynolds Library**

December 5, 2014

Bill Leonard, Professor of Divinity

Interviewer: Tanya Zanish-Belcher

Q: This is an interview with Professor Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University and Professor, would you like to describe your family background and where you grew up?

A: I'm a native Texan. I grew up in North Texas. The first ten years in Wise County Texas where both my parents had grown up on farms and moved to town in the county seat of Wise County. Decatur Texas was my birthplace and then when I was ten we moved to Fort Worth and I grew up in Fort Worth through high school and beyond and then left Fort Worth, left Texas, in 1971 to go Boston to work at Boston University and Ph.D. Then started moving through various schools.

Q: How did you decide to go to Texas Wesleyan?

A: As it turned out, being a good Baptist, I had always hoped to go to Baylor, but our family took some turns just as I was entering college and we didn't have the money for me to go there and Texas Wesleyan was, actually now it's Texas Wesleyan University, then it was Texas Wesleyan College known in the area as TWC: Teeny Weenie College and I went and liked it very much. Very small classes, a lot of mentoring teachers and it was a great place.

Q: And you went on to further education at a variety of institutions. What was your decision making process as you went through that?

00:01:50

A: I went from Texas Wesleyan to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and then to another Methodist based institution Boston University. I'll go back a bit. One of the most interesting things for me now about my undergraduate education is that, at that time, the chair of the religion department at Texas Wesleyan was the only female chair of a religion department in the whole country. Her name was Alice Wonders and she became a great mentor to me. I think my conservative Texas Baptist pastures never imagined that an ordained Methodist female would be in that position. So they never warned me that I should not go. Now they warn young men about studying with women in the Southern Baptist Convention and I am not in that convention anymore. So, I didn't know I wasn't supposed to and she was a major mentor in my life and in my decision to consider teaching as a vocation. Then, I decided to go to seminary and applied to Boston University. Another Methodist school. And in those . . . that was during the Vietnam War and this was before the so-called lottery for the draft, and my draft board would not recognize University divinity schools because they thought people were sneaking out of the draft by going to university divinity schools. They would only recognize theological seminaries. And so, I very quickly had to change and I happened to be in Fort Worth and engaged to marry a woman who was at Texas Wesleyan,

Candace my spouse, and we couldn't leave so I went to Southwestern and I was very pleased. I had very good mentors, particularly in the church history department and I think I learned there more concretely of my interest in and my desire to teach Church history. So, that was how it began. And then by that time both my spouse and I knew we had to get out of Texas or be there forever. And so, we applied at various places and decided to go to study American religion at Boston University and we did that.

00:04:29

Q: You served as a professor at a number of different institutions, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Stanford and Wake Forest, and you were also visiting professor at Yale and in Japan and I'm just wondering when you look over that career, what experiences stand out for you the most?

A: The formative opportunity for me was that I happened to be hired straight out of graduate school to teach at the oldest of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminaries, there's six of those nationally, and I think my . . . there's a sense in which . . . this is nineteen . . . this is twenty four and it's forty years ago this month that they invited me to come for a visit. So, that institution where I taught for sixteen years was really where I learned about classroom teaching and writing and doing research in ways beyond the doctorate and dissertation and the great many people there were mentors to me in terms of shaping who I am and what I do still in the classroom.

And it was in those days, as I said, the oldest, 1859, of the Southern Baptist Seminaries and one of the two most progressive in terms of its approach to theological education and the other being Southeastern Theological Seminary on the old campus of Wake Forest. And so I really learned to teach and do research in that place with great mentoring. And then the Southern Baptist convention took a turn in which there was about a ten to fifteen year struggle known euphemistically as the controversy between so called conservatives and moderates in the SBC over not only the systemic control of the denomination itself, the nominational mechanism, but over the identity and ideology and I came of age during that controversy and much of my writing about Baptist began as a result of that controversy. I was trained as an American church historian and had a great deal of interest in American revivalism and in the whole issue of the religious experience in America and that is what I was invited to teach.

I was actually a specialist in Baptist studies in our church history department. So, that was not in my area, but I've often said, when the Baptist went dysfunctional, I had to decide if I was gonna find out why and so I started writing articles and then later many of the books I've written have been related to the Baptists in some way or another and all of that grew out of those years and then out of two sabbaticals. The one at Yale, which was the first one. Where I studied with the great church historian Sydney Ahlstrom in American religious studies. And then we lived and both of us taught in Fukuoka Japan our last sabbatical, eighty-eight, eighty nine, for a year at a Baptist founded University Seinan Gakuin University.

So, out of all that, when I came back from that last sabbatical because I'd been gone they elected me president of the faculty, the faculty club it was called. And that was when the trustees at that institution took a very hard right in a by the majority in terms of their ideological approach and imposed some issues on the faculty that we felt were extraneous to the hiring procedure that was given us. So I participated in what is

essentially what I would call labor management negotiations. And what I learned was and I carry this to this day, I have to say quite frankly, two very important things about higher education. One is, tenure won't save you ultimately. It will protect you long enough to find other places to teach. When there is a crisis related to an institution and its identity, tenure can help slow down the departure. But it will not protect you indefinitely and as it turned out, I left to go to Stamford in 1992 but I would say eighty percent of the hundred member faculty of that seminary left within five years. That is how drastic the change and the intensity was. One thing I've learned and I've never said this out loud on recording, is that you can work for institutions of higher education as long as you don't trust them. If you trust them, meaning that you suppose that they will act in ways that are always humane about every faculty member, faculty issue then you will certainly be disappointed. But if you know that they are going at points, even though they may say how humane and how much they may try to be humane with faculty and staff. They are always an institution and it can take a turn. Probably not as radically as took place at the place I was at but it will happen sooner or later and you just have to be ready for that and not . . . I've seen people crushed because they thought institutions would act in ways they didn't act and I think it's better to be prepared to expect where they're going to go on those issues.

Q: What brought you to Wake Forest originally?

00:10:58

A: By the time we had to leave Louisville and the Southern Baptist Convention my spouse, Candace, had done a doctorate in Spanish theater and literature at Indiana University so we really were both hoping to find teaching jobs at the same institution or near each other and Stamford University, a Baptist related school founded in I think in eighteen, eighteen forty five or so, not long after Wake Forest was found. Invited me to come and chair their religion and philosophy department and they invited her to teach in the world languages. So we went there to do that and we would be there a long time. And we were there four and a half years and I think one thing happened there that shapes us as a family and me as a practicing churchman and teacher as well. While we were there we had come from what I call, as I mentioned, the Baptist wars and I was really worn out from it. And felt somewhat, I don't mean to whine, but felt somewhat beat up by it. And I just didn't want to get engaged in another church that was Southern Baptist in which the battle was still going on. And I met the pastor of the 6th Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham. Doctor John Porter. Sixth Avenue is one of the great historic African American congregations in Birmingham and Porter had been there at that point about 28-30 years. He invited me to come and speak at the church. And so I went to speak and then we started visiting as a family. And then, about three months later, we were in the parking lot one day coming out of an older African American woman came up to me and knew that I was a minister too and that I was ordained and she said, "Reverend you've been coming to visit here quit awhile haven't you?" And I said, "yes". And she said, "don't you think it's time you walked?" And you see in Baptist churches, when you join you walk the aisle. So we took that as the voice of God and the three of us joined Sixth Avenue

END OF VIDEO

VIDEO 02

. . . to be a Baptist that day, which set us on another trajectory. One, a new way of being Baptist. So, this is Sixth Avenue's national Baptist denomination. So, that was when we left the Southern Baptist Convention and stepped into another domain. But, which also has taken us . . . that was '93 . . . and we're now members of First Baptist Church Highland Avenue, which is the oldest African American Baptist church here. So, that's more than twenty years of membership in a predominately African American Baptist church. So, that was one very important thing. We brought that with us in a number of ways. Then Tom Hearn and the search committee looking for a new dean of this divinity school came and invited me to come and interview and actually they were also looking for a chair of the religion department at that time. So, I invited my long time friend Charles Kimball who was teaching at Furman took for both of us to come and they sort of interviewed the both of us at the same time. As to which of us might be the appropriate candidate for the other and Kimball, though I was chairing a religion department, Kimball had most of his career in the Furman undergraduate religion department and most of my career had been in theological education. So, they invited me to be the dean of the divinity school. The idea of the divinity school at Wake had been approved by the trustees in 1989, in part in those years, this is often forgotten now because of the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention.

And from the moderate perspective, the theological and institutional demise of Southeastern Baptist Seminary because the old pipelines in this region had been to go to Wake Forest and then to do theological education, graduate education at Southeastern and that school had been the first of the six Baptist Seminaries to go to the hard right and to disseminate . . . for their faculty to be disseminated . . . well, actually a diaspora out and around. So, that had been in 1991, of the motivating factors, I think, in Alums and church leaders encouraging the university to start a divinity school. And Tom Hearn, President Hearn, also spoke about Wake Forest University coming full circle from its origins founded in part, at least originally, to train Baptist ministers in undergraduate education and to bring that in with the other graduate professional schools, law and medicine and business, as a way of completing the circle of graduate education at Wake Forest. And Walter Harrelson, who had been the dean, two years the dean, or a number of years the dean at Vanderbilt Divinity School had retired to North Carolina and had come here two years before that as what I call the proto-dean, the pre-dean on a grant from the cousins . . . from the Carpenter Foundation in Philadelphia to start the process of getting ready for hiring a dean. And when he left, he really put pressure, I think, on President Hearn, I think, and essentially in a way that was much more gentile than this, because Walter was such a person. Fish or cut bait. Because by that time there was a kind of cycle where the university said, we won't start a divinity school until we have what we think would be sufficient money. But, they had waited a decade . . . or not quite a decade, this was ninety-six, but there were donors who were saying no, we're not going to give until you show us you're going to start.

So, there was that push pull and Harrelson said if you don't do it now it won't get done because you won't find the donors that you need to sustain it long term. And I think he was right about that. So they made the decision to invite me to come in the summer of ninety-six and with an appointment in religion I had learned from the Southern Baptist don't go without tenure because you may need it on your way out the door. And so, I went as a tenured full professor in the department of religion and taught with the religion department, but also worked then for three years, primarily in terms of fundraising, developing the early stages of a curriculum which Walter Harrelson had put in place

before I came and we drew on his very good insights for the initial curriculum and to begin to continue his work in building bridges to churches and potential students.

00:05:30

Q: Okay, I'm going to backtrack for just a moment. One of the interesting things about your career is you also served as a pastor, and interim pastor, for a large number of congregations and I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about the challenges that you faced in that role for congregations?

A: One of the things I have loved about the vocation that has fallen into my lap since those early years at, with the Baptists in Louisville, is the opportunity to function as both a minister in various forums and a professor. And I was ordained right out of seminary. When we went to Boston, again, by grace or luck, I asked at the Boston University theology office our first summer, it was 1971, are there any churches looking for people to do supply preaching? And they said yeah there's little church in Southborough Mass, west of Boston, first community church and they're looking for an interim pastor. So that was my ordination ink wasn't dry. And so, I went to this little church that had had student ministers since 1864 at Newton, Boston University, Harvard the Boston Area. And for my first six months we lived in Boston, but I was the interim pastor and we would drive out there and then they finally said . . . they were so wonderful to me . . . they said you know we've been interviewing people for this job and we don't think we can do any worse than you. So, would you consider being our pastor? And I, so, my spouse and I talked and they had a parsonage next door to the wide frame church built in eighteen seventy one and we moved out there and she got a teaching job in the public schools in Southborough and I preached most every Sunday for four years in that church. It was the most I had ever preached. I had worked as a youth minister but I hadn't preached much. And they taught me about Sunday to Sunday preaching and the love of preaching that I had had, but didn't know if I could do. And so when I went to Louisville, the opportunity for doing interims became quickly available because a lot of churches looked to the seminary there for years for interim pastors and that set me on a trajectory. The other thing quite honestly, we were paid so little there that all of the professors had to moonlight in some way of another. Doing counseling, teaching bible studies to the bible people . . . or some of the rest of us doing interim pastoring. So, I've had, I've lost count now, over thirty. I think my, I think . . . And that would be anywhere from six months to a year that that's been the . . . or a little over a year and I have loved it a lot because I've said I think I'm really a hothouse preacher . I don't. I tell my pastor this all the time. He has to be under the heat of the same group of sinners every Sunday. I get to shop around on sinners. And so, I don't have to have the same kind of consistency in terms of did I preach this last year. I can use sermons or ideas in different places. That's been a fun thing. But it's also taught me a lot about being with people in the church. As an interim you still get to do pastoral care. I've done baptisms and funerals, and weddings and those kinds of settings which are great gifts of grace that people give to let you into their families at those vulnerable moments. And I think that's one of the things I've learned. The other is that congregations and I've not just done it with Baptists--congregations need, I think, those transitional persons who can come in and don't necessarily carry the baggage of previous ministers or . . . There's a church in Charlotte where I preach more than any other place . . . Myer's Park Baptist in Charlotte and they always say you know we just love to have you come or something like that. And I tell them the only reason is that you let me come and say whatever I want to because I can get on near 77 and you don't have to listen to me the rest of the week.

So there's a sense in which there's a freedom that churches give you because they know you're going to leave. So you can often say things and try out things . . . work without a net that you wouldn't necessarily if you were in a permanent place. So those are the kinds of things I've learned.

Q: You've written and researched on many topics related to Baptist history and what stands out for you as the primary issue. Why do I have a feeling it's going to be the controversy. I don't want to lead you, it might be something else completely but what would you say looking back over the past thirty or forty years . . . what are the main issues?

00:11:03

A: You're right in asking that as the initial question and as I said I really began writing about the Baptists when the Baptists were in a great struggle, the Southern Baptists, and I started actually writing a series of articles for the Christian Century magazine. Over a period of time. They were very good. This was in the nineteen eighties that really let me try to focus on issues as a historian and put this controversy in the context of older, parallel or distinct intersecting controversies in Baptist life but it was also a great pastoral care gift to me because I could work out my thoughts about this without being angry as much by writing about it. Then, in nineteen ninety I wrote a book called God's Last and Only Hope which was a quote from an old Baptist preacher. The fragmentation of the old Baptist Southern Convention and that really . . . that monograph carried me into these larger issues of Baptist studies. And so beyond the controversy, I have, I find that Baptist are a fascinating case study in the development of a kind of global approach to the idea that the genius of faith is that each person needs to be responsible for choosing that faith, himself, herself and for all the cultural problems and biases and struggles that Baptists have had, one of their singular gifts to the larger culture is, at least in Western Europe and the US, they essentially invented religious pluralism. Baptist were the first, in English, to say that God alone was judge of conscious and neither a state church or a state privileged . . . neither a state privileged church or a state could coerce

END OF VIDEO

VIDEO 03

The faith of the heretic, the people who believe the wrong things, or the atheists, the people who don't believe at all, and that was the radical pluralistic issue that even atheist have the freedom to choose not to believe at all. That is a radical issue in seventeenth century European and also American life. The puritans were exiling Baptists and hanging Quakers on Boston Common in the sixteen hundreds in this period of time. So, I think that, in terms of the larger global gift that has now become so normative that it's even scared Baptist, that gift of un-coerced faith as a basis for a pluralistic view of religious liberty is to me central, but if I can speak a little more as a church historian the singular identifying characteristic of a Baptist is their idea of a believer's church and that is what I've just said that the church should be composed not of the baptized in a given region a diocese, but of those only who have professed faith for themselves and received Baptism as a sign of that professed faith and from that grows their dissenting tradition that neither the church nor state can compel you to believe. So, the centerpiece of Baptist religious liberty is not enlightenment secularism, it's un-coerced faith and I

think that's and now, more and more, since you asked about it, it seems to me that in a post-modern world where localism is normative and where, and where people need to be able to decide their religious identity in a specific context, Baptist have a great sense of freedom about that. The issue that is confronting Baptist now in America, across the theological spectrum, but particularly right of center is the loss of cultural privilege. Because there was an implicit Protestant privilege that's been present in American religious life since the founders and particularly in the south. So one of the examples of that is in Winston Salem North Carolina where the county commissioners, with the help now of the Supreme Court, want to have deity specific, particularly Jesus' name, specific prayer at their government meetings. We old timey Baptist think that is the worst possible illustration of religious faith because it compels people who are there with no faith or different faiths to sit and listen to a particular prescribed religious identity. But Baptists certain Baptists, are so worried about losing cultural privilege that they cling to that kind of false, in my view, false security. So Baptists are in their own identity crisis now, like all the other denominations in America over who they are and what the future means. And the greatest singular crisis for Baptists and other denominations is the declining number of people who affirm a religious connection to religious institutions and that's now become normative left of center to right of center and most church groups, Baptist included, don't know what to do about that.

Q: Would you say that these issues have been frequently written about in newspapers and other church newsletters and on religious issues, would you say that the majority of all that also relate to these issues of identity that the Baptist denomination can figure out who they are?

00:04:22

A: Yes, I would say that in this case I tend to think of myself as a student of American religious history with the Baptist as a case study. And so my . . . again from the days in Louisville my opportunity to speak in the public square about this has been another piece of the vocation that's developed with me. Not intentionally but just developed and my teachers in that in the earliest Baptist who did not hesitate to make their views known in the public square and particularly when, with the rise of what became to be the called as the new religious political right from the nineteen eighties on, that was when many people right of center began to speak. Jerry Falwell and others in the public square about their particular views. It seemed to me that it was important for those of us who claimed a similar denominational heritage in Baptist, Falwell was a Baptist for example, but were left of center to speak as clearly as we could and in my case, I hope with some historical underpinning to those issues as well and my great teacher in this was the famous Lutheran historian at the University of Chicago, Martin Marty, who is probably the in the late twentieth and early twenty first century, the most amazing illustration of how that ability to address issues in the public square through church history, through cultural history and religious history, and how that can be done and Marty's been a model for many of us but me included.

Q: Let's circle back to the divinity school at Wake Forest. What do you consider to be your most important contribution to the divinity school at Wake Forest?

00:06:32

A: I saw that in the question you wanted to ask and if you don't mind can I look at my, how are we on time?

Q: We're doing well.

A: You asked, had the question that you sent to me before and I don't mean a false humility but on one level, I don't know what my most significant contribution and I was glad to do what I did and to have the opportunity to help start what probably was the last or one of the last divinity school start ups in the twentieth century. Nineteen ninety-nine was when it started. So, and you can't get any later than that. I hope that, I would say, not just for myself but for me and the first faculty and students I think the mission statement that we helped to create relative to the way it takes us continues to inform the divinity school's identity. When dean Gail O'Day came in twenty ten to be the second dean of the new school, I had been gratified that she came in, without having known about the school previously, in any extensive way. She retained the divinity school with, the divinity school mission statement without amending it and continues in various settings I have heard her speak about the uniqueness of that mission statement in terms of training students not only in basic theological education but to be agents of justice and reconciliation in the world. So I think the mission statement that continues to inform is a contribution that I participated in with the first faculty that I'm very pleased about. The other thing I would say is that, one of my intentions is that I think has been continued. Whether it was a contribution, we'll just have to see is that this should be, from the beginning, a school of the university. There are times, there are certain places where divinity schools have had a parallel identity to the university where they were, but I have, and this was something Walter Harrelson was very strong about, if we were going to be a school of Wake Forest then from the beginning we needed to act like that. And to try to connect with other departments, other programs, the larger curriculum. So, two or three quick examples, one being that we said from the beginning to our students and to this day entrepreneur your masters degree. Utilize the larger university. You're at a nationally ranked university that is a research university, but it's small enough, unlike some larger schools to be able to participate in those. So, we've had people and we've had colleagues in the large university who welcomed our students. Philosophy, History, English, Classics, even Theater and Dance and our students have done that. They have utilized, many of them, have utilized the larger university, I think wonderfully, and I have found that kind of collegiality and welcome from, I think the majority of our faculty and I think that's been, and we've decided, also to this day, that rather than give multiple degrees, as some divinity schools do: a Master of Arts, a master of theology, a doctor of ministry, we would stay with the basic theological degree, the master of divinity, but we would give joint degrees. So, Sam Gladding and the counseling department were the first to join us in a joint master of divinity, Master of Arts and counseling, but now, I think I can name them all. There's a master of arts in sustainability, a J D in div a new degree, a joint degree in education and in bio ethics. So that we have really, I think, utilized the benefits of the larger university.

The other thing I think that and if you ask me on a particular week that I want to illustrate, that continues that I hope I participated in and helped set in motion was that there maybe things that the divinity school can and should do for the larger university that might not get done at least in the same way. So, for example, this week, two days ago

rather on the spur of the moment, after the verdict relative to the Michael Brown event of . . . in which the police officer who shot an unarmed African American youth was not

charged by the . . . grand jury, by the grand jury in Ferguson Missouri and before the New York decision not to indict a policemen in New York for, even more visible problematic arrest, the divinity school under the leadership of Dean Gail O'Day put together a panel of faculty from the law school and the divinity school to discuss that very issue and our lower auditorium in Wingate Hall was packed to standing room only with undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, staff from the large university and I sat there thinking one, this is an important moment, but two, this is exactly the kind of things that divinity schools should be doing. And so there may be ways in which divinity schools can give a witness on campus and in the larger community with the people we bring, with the issues we raise, with the dialogue we'd hope to facilitate that can do things for the university

END OF VIDEO

VIDEO 04

Q: Are there any other experiences connected to your time at Wake Forest that you would like to share?

00:00:28

A: You and I had talked via email and there was one thing you wanted to ask me about was mentors here. I think, when I came here I had never been a dean. I had been an associate dean, briefly, at Louisville and I chaired the religion department but I had not been a dean and I had some very patient supervisors and colleagues. Doctor Sam Gladding in the counseling department was, at the time of my arrival, the acting chair of the religion department and we got to know each other as a part of the search process and have stayed very close friends to this very day. And Sam was the person who had a theological degree, grew up Baptist and went Methodist, as we say, in his marriage to wonderful Claire. But Sam mentored me in ways, he may not even know now that helped me learn the university and it's ethos and he had graduated here and was indirectly related with the Hearn administration came here with Tom Hearn. So, he really was a teacher for me. As was John Anderson who was then the vice president for administration in the university and Anderson, in other ways, helped me learn about working with other colleagues in the larger university and how schools and deans fit together. There was huge autonomy for deans then. They kind of threw you in the lake and said swim and other colleagues who were deans at other schools, Bob Walsh in the law school particularly, Jack Wilkerson and Aje Patel, we all became very good friends. Particularly Wilkerson and Patel to this day and they were here already and they mentored me wonderfully. And then in terms, I think that, in terms of the larger university, I was very pleased to teach in the religion department and get to know, to teach religion one o one, which I had taught at Stamford to undergraduates which is a kind of an introduction to the issue of religion and I really enjoyed teaching undergraduates and the collegiality here, that I've experienced has been very good with friends and the larger university which I think is a great advantage over the free standing

00:03:15

seminary because it allows you to interact with people in a variety of disciplines and that's been a very important thing as well and then the other bridge that I mentioned in Birmingham, but here, when we came here we joined, as I said, the First Baptist Church

Highland Avenue, this is now our eighteenth year as members there and even after eighteen years, I think we are the only Caucasian family. There are other Caucasian members who are in biracial marriages, but we're the only, still, Caucasian family. Our daughter is a person with special needs and our church has been a wonderful place to mentor and spoil her rotten. Still she's thirty nine and very much an adult child and that church has been, so the bridge between the university and the larger community for us particularly through our church has been a very important thing and so I'm very engaged in a variety of issues in the community, as are my other faculty colleagues in the divinity school and I think that's been particularly in the African American community for me as a learner and I hope, a facilitator has been very important and I think, Wake Forest is increasingly intentional about that but can never be too intentional. There's always so much to do and community engagement is essential for all of us.

00:05:00

Q: Okay well thank you very much professor.

A: Good. Great fun. Great questions.

END OF INTERVIEW