

AL 124

Interviewee: Jack Ricks Noffsinger

Interviewer: Stephen Prescott

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P: [This is an interview with Jack Noffsinger, a former pastor of First Baptist Church in Gainesville.] For the record, will you state your full name?

N: I am Jack Ricks Noffsinger.

M: Mary Louise Noffsinger.

P: Is Jack your real first name?

N: Yes, it really is. The family decided there was no use in calling me John. They figured they might as well call me Jack.

P: Would you tell us when you were born?

N: 1918.

M: 1919.

P: Where were you educated?

N: My undergraduate education was at the University of Richmond in Virginia, and my seminary graduate education was at Colgate Rochester Theological Seminary in Rochester, New York.

P: That is interesting. That is where Martin Luther King would later attend.

N: Yes, he later attended that same school.

P: What made you decide to go there instead of one of the [Southern Baptist] Convention seminaries?

N: Well, all of my life I had presumed that I would go to [Southern Baptist Theological] Seminary in Louisville. My father had died at the end of my sophomore year in college, so I worked my way through college for the rest of the time. And it was necessary to work through seminary. Well, Dr. Harold Tribble, then president of the Louisville seminary, was kind enough to come and talk with me about coming to Louisville. He was honest enough to tell me that they did not have any known available scholarships. If I came I might find work, but there was nothing assured about it. About that time Colgate Rochester was aggressively seeking fellows who had been raised in the South to come to their

school, both for what they hoped they might share with us and for what the different culture might do to the school. They offered me a full scholarship and also work, such as heading the book store, so I was able to work my way through. That is why I went to Colgate Rochester.

P: When you worked there did you think you would probably work in the old Northern Baptist Convention, as it was called then, or did you anticipate coming back to this area?

N: I guess if I were honest I did not really think all of that through. I presumed that I would come back to the Southern Baptist Convention. I did not think in terms of making a transfer to what was then known as the Northern Baptist Convention.

P: Since we have both of you here today, can you tell us where you went to school, Mrs. Noffsinger?

M: I attended Virginia Intermont College in Bristol two years. It was a junior college. Then I transferred to Roanoke College, which was a Lutheran college, and got my AB degree in philosophy with a minor in French. Then I went to seminary with him for a year after we were married. I then got my master's at the University of Florida in 1956.

P: A master of education?

M: A master of education, secondary education, right.

P: What degrees did you get from [Colgate] Rochester?

N: I got my bachelor of divinity degree, what they call M.Div. now, from Colgate Rochester.

P: What dates or years were you in Gainesville?

N: We were here from 1951 to 1957.

P: Let me set the context and make sure I have it right. Dr. [Thomas V.] McCaul had a long pastorate here [1922-1948]. Then Leo Green had a short pastorate of a year or so. You came following him, and Dr. McCaul was still in the church. Tell me what you remember about Gainesville and First Baptist Church when you arrived here forty years ago.

M: Well, I remember I loved the Spanish moss. It was very hot, because we moved here in the early fall. I remember our oldest little girl started out in school, and I think she was a kindergarten dropout because she could not take the heat.

When we first came I remember several different places, and we have retraced our steps. One of them was Louie's Seafood on 13th Street and the bakery, which is gone. We loved the bakery. I remember Mrs. Alford's place. She had a restaurant down where the old First Baptist tower is now, and we went there every Sunday. Then I remember the lakes. We loved Lake Geneva. We used to go out there a lot to this cottage and stay on the lake. These are the main things I remember.

N: We both remember the Gator Growls and the parades that came. Our children loved them. We still have pictures of them. We remember the football games. We were very faithful to stay behind the Gators while we were here.

I remember Dr. McCaul was a great supporter. He was so encouraging. He never gave me any difficulty. He gave me a great deal of encouragement. In fact, I have never validated it, but I am just as positive as I can be that he was the one who asked Stetson University to give me an honorary doctorate degree because he felt it might be of some help in the college and university ministry. For many, many years I went all over the country to state universities and church-related schools speaking during religious emphasis weeks and chapels and conducting religious discussions in classrooms. I suppose that that handle might have helped a little bit. Dr. McCaul, I think, was behind that.

M: You also remember fishing.

N: Oh, I do remember fishing a great deal. We had fabulous fishing. Fred Schofield was the minister of music and a perfectly marvelous sportsman. I went with him every Monday. An interesting thing that does not now exist is that all the way out to some years after I left here, First Baptist Church closed lock, stock, and barrel on Monday. The janitors did not even come. So early every Monday morning we would take off and go fishing, or nearly every Monday.

M: Sometimes we would go to the beach at St. Augustine and take our kids. We loved St. Augustine's beach.

P: The town, of course, was much smaller then.

N: Much smaller.

M: About 25,000.

P: Do you remember what kind of membership or attendance you would have had then?

N: Well, I am not good about remembering figures. I do remember that the

attendance at that time [was relatively high]. That period of history was a time in which many people were going to church. It was an "in" thing to do. People had come back from the war. They were anxious to settle into families, and they wanted to be in the church. For example, when we would have the first Sunday that the students were on the campus, when I gave an invitation it was not unusual for over a hundred students to join First Baptist Church on the first Sunday that school opened here. That is quite different from what we run into today. The church was often so packed at worship that it was during the time I was here that they decided to add the two side wings to the sanctuary. Some of the men who succeeded me said that they would like to kick me real good for doing that, but, anyway, it was done.

P: Visibility is not very good [in the wings, nor is the sound].

N: It was done back there. I did not have much to do with it. The laypersons of the church decided to do that.

P: Would you describe Gainesville as a "Bible-belt" town?

N: Would we describe it as a "Bible-belt" town? Well, I suppose so. The presence of the University made this church at that time, First Baptist Church, especially, more, perhaps, open or a little bit more anxious to search and to listen to different ideas and to be more ecumenical than I think might have been true of many churches of the Deep South at that particular time. We even made some overtures to our black brothers at that time, which was not very well looked upon by some.

P: That was one of the things I wanted to ask you about. I know Westside Baptist was a mission during your pastorate, as were Southside and Eastside. You had a lot of mission activity. It is in the charter, at least at Westside, that it would be open to blacks. That would have been a very controversial thing to do in the 1950s. Was it you who was the moving force behind that?

N: Well, I do not want to take that kind of credit. I think there were many people who had a conscience about this at that time. We look back on it and feel we were perhaps far too tentative. The posture of the church here was never very negative to me when I would make strong pleas to open the membership of the church to people regardless of any kind of ethnic or other kinds of background. The University spirit was such that we did not have a violent reaction to that. We had some people who did not agree with it, but I think they were more or less understanding that this ought to be.

P: The townspeople who were not part of the church, did you get opposition from them?

N: We had a few of the townspeople who were very strong segregationists and very deeply convicted about it. Later, after I left here and went to the next church, we were involved in tremendous controversy over the opening of our church to all races.

M: When we were here this was a little early for that.

N: Yes, it had not quite reached that open state of conflict yet.

P: Was it the policy of First Baptist at that time to accept black members?

N: I do not think at that time it had been confronted as such. We discussed it, and it was all more or less in theory. I remember meeting with the deacons in which we would say if anyone were to present himself for membership, this being the church of our Lord Christ, we would have no ground to stand on to refuse that membership. I remember vividly having been in the war and having served with marines as a chaplain in the Pacific Theater and landing at Iwo Jima, for example. I remember the Sunday when I gave an invitation here, and a Japanese boy presented himself to be baptized and to become a Christian in this particular fellowship. We had absolutely no one who, at least openly, raised any question about it, and I baptized him. I remember to this good day what I said in the baptism. I said, "Ted Hiashi, you who were at one time afar off have been made nigh in Christ Jesus. My brother, Ted, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." That was a very dramatic moment in this church.

P: In my days that does not seem like much.

N: In those days it did.

P: In those days it would have been a major [event].

N: It was. It represented something, because there was a lot of feeling left from the bitterness that many of us experienced during the war.

P: Were there any particular individuals at First Baptist that stand out in your mind or individuals in town that stand out in your mind?

N: There were so many. Where would I start and where would I end? As certain as I could be, I would get away and think why did I not speak of that one? I think of M. Parrish and his mother. They had much to do with the leadership of this church when I first came here. I do not know if it would be in any order of significance, but I also recall people like Walter Winn who was a very fine and wonderful Christian in this church. I think of Dr. Bill [William A.] Gager, who was

the Sunday school superintendent for such a long time. He was on the faculty [assistant professor of mathematics] of the University of Florida. So many of the professors were active. Dean [James W.] Norman, dean of the College of Education, was a very strong leader in this church. Dr. Thomas, who was a physician, dearly loved whose picture hangs in the foyer of Alachua General, was not a member of this church. He was a Methodist, but his wife was a member. Dr. Thomas came nearly every Sunday with his wife. He went to sleep during the anthem. He had a marvelous ability to go to sleep quickly in any circumstance. I would go to Kiwanis Club with him, and he would fall asleep before the program ever got started. When we left he would compliment me on my sermons, and his wife said, "You never heard a one he preached." [laughter]

P: At least you satisfied him. You have mentioned Dr. J. Hillis Miller, the president of the University. Was he a member?

N: He was a member of this church and meant a great deal to our life here. A lot of people do not know that Dr. J. Hillis Miller was an ordained Baptist minister. He wrote a book – I have a copy of it – on prayer and worship that is a very highly significant book, but it never did receive widespread attention. Dr. Miller died while I was here, and we had his funeral. Then I accompanied his family to Virginia for the internment of Dr. Miller in his family plot near Charlottesville, Virginia.

P: How would you describe the theology of First Baptist Church at that time?

N: Well, everything of that nature is quite relative. It was much more open because of the University presence than you would find in many congregations. They allowed absolute freedom to the pulpit. They would have the freedom to disagree with me, which I liked. We could have dialogue, but nobody tried to make me conform to any particular biblical interpretation. They gave you the freedom to convey the message of the gospel in whatever way you felt God had inspired you to do it. I would say that the church as a whole was more open and more thoughtful and willing to accept diversity of ideas than what might be true in many situations today.

P: What you would expect from First Baptist Church in a university town. You mentioned Preacher [U. S.] Gordon [pastor, First Presbyterian Church]. He was a major fixture in Gainesville history. Do you remember him?

N: I remember him so well. We were real good friends and worked on many community projects and committees together. I liked him as a person, and we got along quite well. In fact, when I came back some years ago to conduct Holy Week breakfast services here, we also had night services at that time the same week, and Preacher Gordon showed up for the services. Afterwards, they asked

us to stand in the foyer and greet the people as they left. One of those nights a very attractive lady came up to him and said, "Preacher Gordon, you do not remember me, do you?" And as quick as a flash, he said, "Madame, you are so attractive, if I had not forgotten you I would have had to leave the ministry." [laughter] Yes, Preacher was a great, interesting, fascinating character.

P: What did you do when you left Gainesville? Where did you go next?

N: Well, everybody thought I had lost my mind.

M: My daddy especially. He was a business man.

N: I had no notion of leaving. We were so happy here and having such an interesting ministry, plus the ministry that I was having then going all over the country in the college circuit. I did not anticipate leaving. In fact, a church of some significance had tried to get us to come just before the time we did leave. I had not felt that that was what I was supposed to do.

When I was at Ridgecrest [Baptist Training Center in Ridgecrest, North Carolina] speaking in the summer of 1957 to a college gathered there, some friends that we had known from our home city of Roanoke, Virginia, came up and told us about a new church that was just being organized in Winston-Salem, and they asked me on when we were leaving Ridgecrest if I would go to Winston and consult with them on a Wednesday night about forming a new church. Out of that there came a very soul-searching experience and a sense of conviction that we should go there. We left this church with its rather large membership and excellent staff and went to join a group of people, ninety-nine of them, who had just organized this new church. There were no paid staff members. I was even volunteer janitor and swept out the little building we had. Louise came to be the volunteer youth director. For seventeen years she served in that capacity.

M: But I finally became a part of the staff.

N: They finally gave her some token thanks for the excellent work she had done all through that time. She pioneered a coffee-house ministry for youth during the drug culture and pioneered a drama ministry, which has brought us here this time. She is consulting with them [at First Baptist, Gainesville] on the matter of church drama. That is how we happened to leave here. We went to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to a new church that was being organized.

P: I think most pastors' wives do as much for the ministry as the pastor does.

N: You better believe it.

- M: Well, at the same time, I taught in high school. I taught at an all-black school one year. That was quite an experience. The kids were not integrated at that time. The teachers were integrated. I taught in an all-black school, and I taught seventeen years and did the youth work for seventeen years.
- P: It was in Winston-Salem that you taught in the all-black school. Did you teach any when you were in Gainesville?
- N: Well, I taught when Jack was in the service. I taught in Jacksonville one year, and I taught in Virginia one year, also, while he was still in the service.
- P: Do you have any memories of Gainesville in the 1950s, of what it was like?
- M: The youth group here was wonderful. I did camps for the church here out at a "Y" camp, I think. I am trying to think of the name of the camp. Anyway, this was volunteer youth work. They really did not have a youth director here at that time, so I did a lot with the young people here. I did start with drama here; that is where I started in the drama.
- N: Louise, are you the one that come up with the idea of calling it "B High U" to correspond to BSU [Baptist Student Union], which was the college student group?
- M: Yes. Chester Swore came here at one time, and he told us about high school groups that were calling themselves "B High U," like the BSU, so I started that here. We had a wonderful group of young people. I think the high school young people numbered in the eighties or nineties. I did several camps while I was here.
- N: You also wrote your first drama, too. Is that right?
- M: I wrote my first play for this group here. It was really a project for the philosophy of education in Dean Norman's class. That was my project, and I put it on here for the first time. Since then I have written six plays. Two of them have been published, but I have six that I have never done anything with except rewrite them and rewrite them and hopefully make them better.
- P: As we look back, you came to a church that you remember as being a little more open than the average church. Would you say it was not evangelical?
- N: I think they definitely had an evangelical spirit. I always gave an invitation with every service for people to come to Christ. I think the church has always had that spirit.

P: Is there anything you would like to add?

N: You ought to tell about Linda's birth here.

M: Linda, our youngest daughter, was born thirty-five years ago tomorrow in the old Alachua General Hospital with no air conditioning. She was born the twentieth of August, and there was no air conditioning. She was born twenty-eight days early, but she still weighed five and a half pounds, so she was not put in an incubator or anything. I have to call her tomorrow and tell her that I am in Gainesville for her birthday, to celebrate her thirty-fifth birthday. She has three children now. One of them is almost two, one is five, and one is seven.

Our other two children loved Gainesville. They particularly remember the things I mentioned first. They remember Mrs. Alford's Tea House – I guess it was called the Tea House. Anyway, we all went there every Sunday, and they still remember that. Judy, our oldest daughter, went to Kirby Smith up on University Avenue. Our son is in the middle. He is with IBM now. He remembers Gainesville very well. Now, our youngest one does not remember very much. She remembers the lake because when we came back to Lake Geneva several times after we moved to Winston-Salem. In fact, I wish we had bought the place. Now you cannot touch it with a ten-foot pole. These are things I remember about the 1950s. The youth group here, as I said, was really great.

N: I remember, too, that there was a restaurant right up the street called the Primrose Grill.

P: It just closed about a year or two ago.

N: Preacher Gordon one Sunday morning on the radio--some friends of ours heard it – said, "I am going to hurry up and finish my message this morning so we can beat the Baptists to the Primrose Grill." [laughter]

Let me tell you about one of the interesting things [that happened]. The Presbyterians built their new church somewhat parallel [to ours]. Now there is a Southern Bell building between the two, but it was not there then. In those days, as Louise mentioned, there was no air conditioning. When Easter came around, we planned Holy Week services and so did the new First Presbyterian Church. We forgot to coordinate the time of the beginning of the service. We started a half an hour early and had just began to observe the Lord's Supper when the Presbyterian church service started. The chimes, the bells, began to ring out of their tower, and Claude Murphree, who was then organist of the University of Florida and an exceptionally capable organist, simply stopped playing and listened to the key of the chimes of the adjoining Presbyterian church, and for about fifteen minutes played the most beautiful Baptist organ accompaniment to

the Presbyterian chimes that you ever heard. [That was] so symbolic with the way we got along well together as different denominations. We had a fine inter-denominational group at that time.

P: I have done quite a bit of research on the 1920s in Gainesville. There was a Catholic priest here in town – there was only one [Catholic] church here in town – named John Conoley. You have probably never heard of him because he was gone [when you arrived in Gainesville]. He was on campus extensively and was a charter member, as was Dr. McCaul, of the Kiwanis Club. He gave a speech there one time, and it offended the Klan. They ended up kidnaping him and [beat him], leaving him for dead. He left town around February of 1924, long before you were here. That spirit was something that was not here then.

[End of the interview]