

Interviewee: Austin, W.R.
Interviewer: John Calhoun
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WA: The homecomings are still a practice as I think over in many different parts of the country. Some of the churches are critical of them. The fact that they loose a lot of people from moving, and we have more complex place in account with our work, and account of the towns growing instead of the rural area. It makes me think that we are building programs that we had to take care of now. The churches had been rather pathetic, somewhat due to the fact that there were very few people coming, and there were very few services. When the youth groups got meeting, training's unions, and vacation bible school, we needed more buildings and more space. This brought us into a building program. This building program took place after the Second World War more than any other time. All along during the 30's and 40's we would get into smaller building programs, but we had to build several building programs. The building programs were a little difficult because you had to raise money, and you had to live within the amount that the people could raise. So, this was a designated service that we had to give. I learned one thing that if any church that wants a new building can get it. If they are really serving there and help. Everybody helps it seems, all the people will give even if they are not members there, and they are interested in the community and church; they will give their funds. Sometimes the denomination can make small donations, but that is relatively a small one because of the fact that that denomination cannot build a church at every place. I remember one case in which you find out the people that want it. Then you sketch out a little floor plan and let the people be aware of what you are trying to build and what it might cost. Let them vote for what they want. I remember going to this one place. I was invited to go as a pastor because I was expected to build a church there. The church was somewhat divided. They wanted to have it on the side of the hill, and another man wanted to put it down on the level ground, which seemed much better, but they decided to put it up on the side of the hill. We drew a plan for the church. Since they wanted a sanctuary for about 40 by 60 that would be accommodate the crowds that were expected to be there. You have trust. You have to trust a roof if you are to have much over 30 feet across. So we built the brick and trusted the roof. So we went to Richmond for the people there to draw a plan for the roof.

JC: Who actually did the building?

WA: So we got one of the men in the community to take charge of that. This man was quite funny. He was man who never had done of this work. He was a very knowledgeable kind of fellow and likable kind of fellow, but the problem was that we had one who was a preacher, but he didn't have work to do. He wanted to run the church. He was very anxious to tell everybody what to do, but he didn't have any idea of how to tell 'em. This man that he had decided to pay attention to this old preacher who had broke up the whole building project for the last 40 years. So, I went over and asked him to build that church, and he said that he would for God and for his children- he had some people there, and he said yeah. He liked to take a little beer every once in awhile, and some of the people criticized that and said that the whole thing would fall down because

he would have a beer bottle under it or something. I do not know if he drank any beer when he was building the whole thing or not, but I do know one thing. I was the only preacher that asked that man to do anything other than give his money. And when it came time to die, he asked me to preach his funeral because he wanted me to tell the folks that I was the only pastor that asked him to do anything except give his money in his church. They didn't consider him anything because he had a reputation of occasionally taking a beer. He never was intoxicated, and he was very dedicated, and I was awfully proud. So when the folks were finding fault we were building a church. We got the building up and found that we had put the brick on the inside and sealed it with a hard kind of ceilotecks. We had a terrible acoustic problem. I would get in there and preach and it would rebound about 3 or 4 times around. We had to get in there and spend some more money. Finally we ran out of money, and the deacons came around to me and asked me, "what do we do now?" And first of all I said "we got a bank right up here and it has a lot of money." And they said that well how are we going to get it? I said that if you fellows can meet me Saturday here in town, and we will go up and talked to the loan officer and find out what we do. Which we did, and we borrowed some 33 hundred dollars to finish the church. We took about 3 years to pay that off, and we did it. I told them I didn't want to leave the church in debt. I can smile and say it now in 30 days after I paid it off they asked me to leave, and I found out the trouble was that I had voted for the wrong County Superintendent for Education. They didn't like the way I voted, so they turned me off for someone else. I was very much pleased when at the time they had built a pastor's home after this, and they invited me to come back and help them dedicate the pastor's home. The lady that was giving the history of the church made the remark that it seemed like everything in my ministry went smoother than it does at other times. So that put me to a question at that time. I remember one of my friends was working on it. He looked out over the building and said that these people are going to have a wonderful church, God is going to have a wonderful church here if the people will ever let Him in it. So we went on and built a church and it is still standing today. I remember another one that I built- or I led the church in building rather- this was an afternoon apartment. Sometimes in the Second World War we would run up with so many churches that we would have several in the afternoon. So this little church in the afternoon called me down there. I was pastoring along there. We had set up a time for revival meeting. The people down there had decided that they needed a church. We had another little 30 by 40 that had been wrecked in the storm, but it just wasn't a big enough. We had 50 in Sunday schools and no Sunday school rooms. We had training union, but no place for. So, we started this revival and the managed to help me. The people kept talking about how they wanted to build a church. So finally we all got together, we decided instead of having a revival we would get out there and see how much money we could raise for building a church. We raised \$800 I believe is what they had. The men of the church decided that they would all give enough logs to saw out 1,000 board seed of lumber. It was quite a group of them that did this. We had enough – more than enough lumber to build the church. For the summer the lumber that wasn't dressed. We sawed it up and manage that sawed the lumber said that y'all folks are mighty anxious, and that if you all come down here and operate the mill except me sawing, then I will saw it up for you for what the fuel costs me. So that how we got our lumber sawed up. And then after they got the lumber sawed up and stacked up there, then they said Brother Austin we've got to gather our

crops, but we will be back as soon as we get through with the crops. And they did. They gathered the crops and in the meantime we had torn down the old church to put sheeting to cover the other one. And we didn't have a building to talk. We put our benches out there under an oak tree. From the time that we tore it down and through the March of the next year- all during the winter- we had those benches under that tree. The strangest thing happened, I was proudest to tell it the next year, I have never seen a time during that winter when we couldn't sit (maybe we would have overcoats on) outside on those benches under the oak tree in the morning or whatever time we met. I don't think we ever missed a single one. Until we got the church done and 4 heaters in it, we never missed in account of being cold. That one March day we went into the house and lit the 4 heaters we had to open up and cool off. I know that the Lord wanted the church built because He directed the kind of weather we had. We finished that church and we never had more than \$800 in the bank account in one time. We built a 30 by 50 sanctuary, 4 Sunday school rooms, and I believe...and I don't know what else. Well, one man who wasn't too good of a Christian gave one big pine tree, that forest pine. He cut it down, and it sawed out enough lumber to seal the entire church. It was a big forest pine with hearth pine lumber. We had sold or swapped some of the lumber for them to clean and smooth out the side of the material for the seal. What happens when you go back and think about those things, those are some of the accomplishments and many of building projects was small; we usually had them early. I remember in the church I served in the delta; I went there in a building program and served there a couple years till we finished that. They put in pews after I left. Later on they decided they wanted a more expensive church, so this building program can get a hold of you and take you far. So, those building programs were a blessing to us. A lot of people do things – the more you get people to do for you the happier you can be.

JC: What would you say was the general cost of raising a church? Or would you say it would be dependent on different people providing?

WA: If you could get to talk to builders they could tell you what you needed. Most of the people were aware of the size church you wanted, but that also wasn't too much trouble to figure out what it cost. This one church, which I was telling you about, that I had to get that man to buy it. They said that if you had been here when we started this we had planned to spend 10 thousand dollars. I made up my mind that we wouldn't spend 10 thousand on it. And we didn't, we spent 10,600 dollars. The whole idea was that people were buying tractors about that time and taking about 3 or 4 years to pay for them. They wanted to build a church that they could build in 3 months. I wouldn't take that. That wasn't giving God a fair share. If you were going to spend 5 or 6 shares buying a tractor; an automobile, and I think you should give God an equal sharing. We raised 6 thousand dollars and the convention gave us \$250, and then we borrowed 33 hundred. Then the rest was just anything else we took it up locally.

JC: Was there a general system of being called to different churches?

WA: Well, one time I called the pastor's annually. I got in about when that was changing. People that called them annually liked the politics of the thing. They liked to

put up 2 or 3 and vote on it. I promoted the idea that if I was called to a church, and I was satisfactory producing what the people wanted then they would keep me, but if I didn't they would turn me off and get someone else to do it. Of course, Baptist people no one can tell the Baptist how to do because it is a democratic thing. It is one of the most democratic things I have ever seen in my life- everybody has equal voice and anybody can suggest the program or vote on it. One vote counts as much as the other. The best thing in that is that if you can keep the politics out of the thing, and if you go in there and you pastor the church and you please the people then you stay, but if you don't while someone will tell you and you will be gone. Usually, I stayed from 3 to 4 years, sometimes 5 or along there. One of the churches I stayed 7, and the finally last one I have been 10 years and 3 months. Usually the older you get the less they ask you to be moving around.

JC: Where did you live? What kind of housing did you have?

WA: Well we had different. Early part you had to furnish your own living. I remember the first pastor's home I lived in was donated to this church by a millionaire. He was just trying to help; he wasn't a Baptist. He had built the home virtually by himself; He had bought the silver and the china. It was sitting right in the middle of 10 acres that belonged to the church. There was a big dug well to the north end of the house there and the porch. This was very comfortable by the way houses went by back then. It was considered pretty good. Now some places put me to live in an old store building and had added on some side rooms and some various things for the boys to sleep in. We lived in that for 2 or 3 years or more. Then, when I was in MS delta I lived in a house that had just been finished- it was not very good, but it was a home. In there we had running water because we got our water from the well that was 1/2 of mile south of there. It came to the top of the ground with about 50 pounds of pressure. They put the pipes in there and let it run, and we didn't pump the water it just ran in the house from about 1/2 mile south there where the school house was had a well that operated continuously. We had no lack of water there. Some of the water was not real good, but some of the conditions of the homes were not too good. However, over the years, I have been pleased to note that there is definitely growth of number of people that have pastor homes and splendid homes that they have now. Now the homes now that they churches spend are 20 -30 thousand dollars for a pastor's home, usually with a lot of the labor given and that sort of thing. They are really nice; this like everything else has improved over the years.

JC: What part did you family play?

WA: oh very much. You know the wife was always...well, the first instance, for example, Vacation Bible school that we had at one of the churches. I was busy in revivals and had not time to be there. We got notice from some of the girls in college that they would come and help us. The girls that came in help them stayed in our house - the pastor's home. My wife worked with them. She taught the juniors and everything. I remember the story of one of the junior boy. She was trying to get the folks to bring the Bibles so they could study 'em. The wife told this neighbor boy that she wanted him to bring a Bible tomorrow. I guess they were a little short of bibles, so on he decided that on the way to church there wasn't anything else he could bring except his big family Bible, and the wife had told him to bring his Bible. So, he upped with the thing under his

arm, it was quite a load by the time he got there. He saw the wife and said, "Mrs. Austin, I've got my bible." I remember that time we had 17 enrolled in vacation bible school. We had our revivals somewhat after that. We had 17 additions. I don't know how this happened; we had as many additions as we did in the Bible school. The wife was very active in this, in fact more active than I was. The wife usually had to teach a Sunday school class or something. We had all these folks visiting in and out. That was one of the great teachers on the thing - the visitation we had. We had a little calf set that we decided to can it and make beef out of it. So, the neighbors came in and helped us kill the calf and cut it up and all that kind of thing. We had lots of many happy memories of working together on things like that. Anytime that you can promote actions with families together and the family life, anything to promote this, are usually a good promotion for your church and care for and make a memory.

JC: What would you say with the hardships in contrast with the rewards?

WA: For instance now, second thing is that it was hardship on the wife because she had to rub off on the rub board by her hand my shirts- I wore a lot of white shirt back then at the time- that was the _____. They had to be starched and iron, and she did all that. We didn't have electric irons; we just had the old smoothing irons. She would have to build up a fire out there and heat the irons. She would iron those shirts, and that was not very easy, that was a great task. And being separated from home- sometimes you are 30 or 40 miles away in a revival meeting. Sometimes we had to get neighbors to come in if the wife got scared at night. Of course the rewards are very great- always is- regardless of the problems you have take because granted the more you deny yourself to God, the more your rewards seems that you get. If you are willing to put God first then always you have rewards coming in.

JC: Is there anything in particular you would like to share with us?

WA: Now I can't think of anything particular now. There were many wonderful experience as I go along, but I do want to say this. I have met a lot of wonderful people and walked hand in hand with them. I am certainly and indeed grateful to all the good Christian people, who made our life livable and helped us to care for it and what God wanted us to do. This is more gratitude than anything else is. I had rather be a Baptist preacher than a President of the United States. You can really preach the truth; they don't hinder you. You can preach the truth and care for it, for God and where it is at what you feel called to do. When you go back and you see people, and they thank you for the life that you lived before them and the help that you are mutually one to another then you feel like you have been worth a little bit to somebody.

JC: Thank you.

WA: I hope that helps you get a good grade.