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Oral History Interview Transcript with Wesley Lyles

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Interviewee: Wesley Lyles

Interviewers: Bonnie Hamer

Interview Date: 07/21/2025

Interview Location: Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA (Phone Interview)

List of Acronyms: WL – Wesley Lyles, BH- Bonnie Hamer

Transcript by Alexia Griffin

[00:00:02] Wesley Lyles: My name's Wesley Lyles. I was born in Valdosta, Georgia. My birthday is April 7th, 1985.

[00:00:08] Bonnie Hamer: Can you tell me what role you have in the church?

[00:00:14] WL: I'm the superintendent of Sunday schools.

[00:00:21] BH: Can you tell me a little bit more about what you do as the Sunday school superintendent?

[00:00:27] WL: As a superintendent of Sunday school, we in charge of the Sunday schools, making sure everybody has their literature and opening up Sunday school, and I teach the men's class. Pretty much being responsible for Sunday school.

[00:00:46] BH: Okay, nice. Can I ask you what role did the church play in your family life growing up?

[00:00:55] WL: Yeah, the church pretty much was centered. Religion basically was a big part of growing up. I grew up in the church. I've been there all my life. So, it's always been there at the center. Always going to church and going to programs and doing different things at the church that they have going on.

[00:01:25] BH: What type of programs do you remember?

[00:01:47] WL: I remember like we'd have anniversaries, usher anniversaries. We'd have big events that go on at church like weddings and sadly funerals. I remember we had some big funerals. Easter, like Easter programs, the Santa Easter speeches and doing the Easter skit. Also, like church anniversary, we had 153 this year. So, we're going to have another anniversary this year. Vacation Bible School was pretty big. Just different programs like that.

[00:02:22] BH: Do you have any fond childhood memories?

[00:02:45] WL: Yeah. Like, I would say the fond memories is growing up, how we used to have

church, the devotion, the old school devotion, and singing. Those things are still what's very special, how we used to have church.

[00:03:05] BH: Because, I remember last time we spoke, we definitely talked about a fond memory with baseball.

[00:03:11] WL: Yeah, I remember that. We played baseball at a church and I was running to the base and the guy was going to get me out. And I ran around and I didn't know you couldn't, you had to stay on the baseline. Yeah, I remember that.

[00:03:31] BH: Do you have any fond memories from the Trunk or Treats?

[00:03:35] WL: Yeah, Trunk or Treats. I can remember one time when we had the old school building behind the church, they had a casket in there. I always remember that they had a casket in there. They had somebody jump out the casket in there. So yeah, we had a good time.

[00:03:55] BH: Oh gosh. Why do you believe that church involvement is important on a personal level and for the community?

[00:04:04] WL: Because, it's our mission. The church is very important, especially in our community. And it's centered, especially for me. But it's important for the community and it's important for our church because it's been here so long and it's important to continue the church and with membership and our mission for the church. It's important that we continue what our ancestors started and that way in the future and years to come, the church will still be there and we can say, this is what was started and how it was started and basically tell them how we grew up in the church and what it meant to us and how we did things and tell our children that.

[00:05:07] BH: Wow, that is so cool. How have you seen the church change or evolve over the years?

[00:05:15] WL: Over the years, as far as, like I say, after COVID, churches changed a lot. Masks are optional now, but as far as a lot of people got out of tradition of coming to church, so it's not as full as it used to be. People can watch it online and get out of custom to stay at home for a few years, so it's not, people don't come to church like they used to.

[00:05:47] BH: So you've noticed some shifts in the way people approach faith and church over

time?

[00:05:53] WL: Yeah. It's more of you can stay at home now versus coming to church. Because we were in a tradition of going to church and that was our every Sunday thing or going to Bible study. Now, we have online church and we can just skip out on church because we got used to not going. So that's definitely a change and shift in people's beliefs or not really beliefs, but what they do.

[00:06:24] BH: Right. I know last time we talked, we also spoke on the history of the church. There was some kind of split that was going on.

[00:06:35] WL: Yeah, they, it's like a... Some of the members left and they went to another church. And sadly, my mom was one of them. I'm still waiting, wanting her to come back. But yeah, there was a split. Disagreements and things like that with the pastor at the time. There was a vote held and we basically we have a different pastor now, so. But slowly though, some of those folks are trickling back in. Thankfully, they're coming back.

[00:07:20] BH: Wow. And the church still persevered because you said the other church didn't. Right?

[00:07:25] WL: Right, that church is no longer open.

[00:07:28] BH: Yeah. I think that's a testament to River Hill Missionary Baptist Church's connection to the community.

[00:07:36] WL: Right, right.

[00:07:38] BH: I was hoping to tie in how closely related people are in the church and in the Jones community. Can you talk a little bit about that?

[00:07:50] WL: Yeah, when I was growing up, everybody was related. Didn't matter where you went, everybody was related in the community. They were related. There was kin somehow. And in the church, it's for me personally, not as much so now. I have a few family members in the church, but back when I was growing up, everybody was related. My aunts and uncles and cousins and sisters, brothers, everybody was in the church. So it was a big family church, as far as my family. And in the community, nowadays we have people that have moved away,

obviously. And they've grown up and they've gone to different places and things like that, big family church.

[00:08:47] BH: What part has River Hill played in the Jones community?

[00:08:52] WL: It's always there. I said last time, like during storms, things like that, it's a shelter. We have generators and things like that. The church has always been a strong part of the community as far as religion and faith and teaching. As far as, the kids coming up, we all meet at church and then we get to school and we're like, "Hey, I know you from church."

[00:09:29] BH: Wow.

[00:09:30] WL: Yeah.

[00:09:31] BH: How has River Hill helped your personal faith?

[00:09:36] WL: Since as I grew up in the church, personally, it's something that's always been there. Like I said, last time my grandma, she'd have us walk in the church back in the day, back before the road was like it was, like it is now. But she'd have us in the road walking the church. And it's always been a strong part of my life, seeing as I grew up in the church and always been in the church. It's definitely a big part. I still go to church and the activities and things like that still today.

[00:10:17] BH: Oh wow. What are some of the outreach programs that the church has?

[00:10:23] WL: The outreach? We have the prison ministry. We have the seniors, the nursing home. They go to the nursing homes. Bible study, obviously. We have church and we have Friends and Family day. And our different programs like that. We do help the, you know, people come in and need help and things like that. So we do have those programs.

[00:10:54] BH: So cool. So what are your hopes for the future of your family, your church, and community?

[00:11:02] WL: Well, hopefully a lot of my family, I hope it comes back to being this big family church. You know, that's a goal of mine, getting people to come back. I want the church to be recognized as a historical site, the church and the cemetery and everything to be preserved. That way it'll be there, in the future for our kids and family members and everybody that we can say,

back in the day. I can remember when we went through that process. So, but the church is, this church has been there 153 years. I want it to be there another 153 years.

[00:11:44] BH: Yes, sir. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

[00:11:50] WL: No, I just thank y'all for what y'all are doing. You know, going through this process and talking to people and collecting all the information and doing the lab work. And I really appreciate what y'all are doing.

[00:12:02] BH: Thank you. I just feel really bad that our whole 40 minutes is now 13. I'm so sorry.

[00:12:10] WL: It's okay. It's okay.

[00:12:13] BH: Oh gosh. I wrote down everything that I could remember from those 40 minutes. So I will probably create a summary that includes some of the things we didn't mention in this 13 minutes.

[00:12:25] WL: Okay.

[00:12:26] BH: Just because I want that information to be on the website. I'm running out of hours when I can work. But whenever I come back in August, I'll probably start on all of that and I might send it to you to ask for you to go over it just to make sure the information's right.

[00:12:45] WL: Okay.

[00:12:46] BH: Because it wouldn't be like a direct quote from you, so no one could really use it. They would only use it for like context. So I might do that if that's okay.

[00:12:56] WL: Yeah, that's fine.

[00:12:57] BH: Okay. Well, I think that concludes the interview.

[00:13:06] WL: All right.

[00:13:08] BH: Yeah. Well, I hope to see you soon at the church.

[00:13:13] WL: Okay, take care.

[00:13:14] BH: Yep, have a good day.

[00:13:15] WL: All right, you too. Bye.

[00:13:18] BH: Bye