Narrator: The Rev. Dr. Harold T. Lewis

Interviewer: The Rev. Melana Nelson-Amaker, Collection Development Liaison for the African American Episcopal Historical Collection

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Abstract:
In this interview, prominent Episcopal priest the Rev. Dr. Harold T. Lewis discusses his interest in and research on the history of the black Episcopal experience.

Transcriptionist: Christopher Pote, Assistant Archivist for the African American Episcopal Historical Collection

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Nelson-Amaker: It’s February 15th, I’m the Rev. Melana Nelson-Amaker of the African American Episcopal Historical Collection. I’m here at Virginia Theological Seminary with the Rev. Dr. Harold T. Lewis, priest, scholar, and author of several books including, *Yet with a Steady Beat: The African American Struggle for Recognition in the Episcopal Church.* Dr. Lewis we are really grateful for your coming today.

LEWIS: Thank you. Good to be here.

N-A: And grateful for all your widespread and significant contributions to the Church.

LEWIS: Thank you.

N-A: I’d like for this interview to focus on your work as a historian.

LEWIS: Okay.

N-A: So I wanted to ask you first thing, would you tell us whence came your passion for history in general and the history of black Episcopalians in particular.

LEWIS: That’s a good question; not a question I expected. I have a great love of the past and tradition and realized we didn’t come out of ether, we came from someplace. So I’ve always been fascinated by my roots of various kinds and I have always been an Episcopalian. My particular passion about the history of black Episcopalians probably came about when I was at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale and had a lot of classes with people at YDS [Yale Divinity School], African Americans who were members of churches like CME [Christian Methodist Episcopal], AME [African Methodist Episcopal], and so on. And they found it odd that I was in what they called a white church. I didn’t know it was a white church, so that really piqued my interest. I think the book began answering the question of: Why have blacks remained in the Episcopal Church? And that’s the question I tried to answer.

N-A: Who were your mentors and fellows travelers in the historical field or realm?

LEWIS: Well, I have a great debt to pay to Carleton Hayden, whom I’ve known for a very long time since I was a young priest here in Washington and he was already at Howard University. He in fact encouraged me, ultimately, to do a doctorate; as did Kortright Davis, who was the person who directed me to the University of Birmingham where I got my doctorate in England. So those two loom large as historic mentors. In terms of mentors in general I grew up under Richard Beamon Martin who was my rector at Brooklyn before he became the Suffragan Bishop of Long Island. He is still a giant of a man. He’s now about 95 and holding his own.

N-A: I noticed that we’ve got sound overhead [In response to the sound of pipes banging], so this tape can be easily edited. If it gets prohibitive I’m going to say let’s just pick up and walk to another room.
LEWIS: Okay.

N-A: So you were fascinated, while you were in seminary you said, about these other churches of black folks who had some Episcopal roots and wondering where you came from and then having these mentors who encouraged you. Is that how the notion of doing the book itself came about?

LEWIS: Well, it had its genesis there. I think too, the other thing that certainly had an influence was the eleven years that I spent at the Episcopal Church Center. I intended to be there for five years. I was in charge of the Office of Black Ministries. I went there in 1983 when there was no Caribbean desk, no Central American desk, no African desk. So I kind of took it upon myself to expand my ministry to include not only African Americans, but people of the African Diaspora.

One of the things that was the fruit of this was the First Conference of Afro-Anglicanism in Barbados in 1985. Then, I think, what that helped me to understand was the commonality that people of color have throughout Anglicanism, regardless of whether we grew up in the West Indies or Africa or something, because we were always kind of separate and apart, or not considered part and parcel of the real Anglican Church. We were kind of like missionized people who were there by adoption and grace so to speak. So that kind of influenced my thinking.

And actually, the book *Yet with a Steady Beat* is the book version of my dissertation which was called *No Alien Race, No Foreign Shore*. Another line from a hymn, I'm big on hymns. I did it at the University of Birmingham in England which was kind of an odd place to do a dissertation on black American history, but the chairman of the Department of Missions there was very much interested in comparing how the American Church ministered to its black constituency as compared to how the Church of England ministered to its African constituency and so on and so forth.

My own roots are in the West Indies, so I have that strain that I think is a very important one in the Episcopal Church. I feel that were it not for West Indians there would be no Black Episcopal Church as we know it. The reason being that black West Indians did not have hang-ups about being in a white church because that was not their experience. The only white Anglicans there were the clergy. So when they [black West Indians] came to these shores they either found or founded an Episcopal church because that’s all they knew. So that really created a major nucleus of black Episcopalians in the Church.

N-A: So, Dr. Hayden and Dr. Davis encouraged you to go on and do the dissertation.

LEWIS: Right.

N-A: And you took this up in Birmingham and once you started the dissertation work was publishing as a book in mind?

LEWIS: Well, in the back of my mind yes, but when you’re trying to get a dissertation approved that’s your major focus. But once it was -- And Kortright Davis was one of the thesis advisors. He’s one of the people who actually examined me for the orals, because you had to have an external person, so I chose him. And he very
graciously came to England for that purpose. But again, Kortright came to the rescue. It was he who suggested that the book be published and he was going to one of these book fairs, you know these publishing places where people sit around and you come and say I’d like to publish a book. So he took a synopsis of the book which I had written, and so on, and it was accepted by what was then Trinity Press International, I think that’s part of the Morehouse Church Publishing thing now. And they it accepted it and it was published in 1996.

One of the differences between the dissertation and the [book] -- Dissertation by definition should -- You have to have a certain distance from it to maintain academic integrity. It shouldn’t be biographical as such. So I purposely ended the history in 1968, for all intents and purposes, because that was the year I entered seminary. And that was the, I think if I’m not mistaken, the centennial of the UBE -- Well, the beginning of the UBE, but the centennial of the Conference of Church Workers Among Colored People and it seemed like a logical place. But when the book-- The only recommendation they had when they accepted the book was that I should update it, bring it up to date and make it more timely. So I brought it up to the immediate present, the then present and talked about -- You can almost see the change as you read in terms of style and content because I talked about certain issues facing African Americans as of the mid-'90s, especially concerns about the leadership of the Episcopal Church of that time, namely the Presiding Bishop and other things. A lot of what I said was controversial, but that has always been my style.

N-A: You do love hymns, that is clear in your works and in your writing of texts for them, and etc. So you started your dissertation with a line from one hymn, but the book is [Track 3] published with a line from another.

LEWIS: Titles are important because they kind of set a tone. I chose “Yet with a steady beat” as the title because it seemed to summarize the assiduousness, the dedication, that black Episcopalians have had in terms of keeping the Church’s feet to the fire. Black Episcopalians never let up; it was a steady beat. In every age, somebody was raised up, or some bodies were raised up and through the Conference of Church Workers, among other people. Or the UBE. Or individuals like Artemisia Bowden. Or whoever. We constantly reminded the Church that she said she was catholic and she should keep up with that. And that’s been -- But I think too that in doing that the African Americans of the Episcopal Church not only carved out a place for themselves, or not only forced their own recognition, I think they gave a lesson to the Church about its catholicity, which it really never had taken seriously in the same way. So that’s where that title came from.

N-A: How long did it take, this research and writing?

LEWIS: That’s a good question. It took exactly two years. I got my Ph.D. in 1996 [later revised to 1994], in December. And I entered the University of Birmingham in ’94 [’92]. The rule there is that you cannot submit your dissertation before twenty four months have elapsed. In point of fact, nobody does. You know, they kind of, you know, study and take notes and soak up seminars and so and so forth, and then gradually get around to writing. Although I was an ordained priest when I was very
young, I was a late vocation when it came to academics, so I didn’t have a whole bunch of time to wait around. Besides, these ideas were in my head; it was a matter of just putting them down on paper.

I had a very interesting process because I had two advisors. One advisor was a professor of Missions at the University of Birmingham. And the other was the head of the Dubois Institute at Harvard. So they were kind of theological and historical mentors. And the University of Birmingham required that there be an external advisor because I wasn’t there all the time. I was there half of the time. Werner Ustorf was the advisor in England and Randall Burkett was the Harvard guy. So I would submit chapters to them and they would make their comments. And I go and discuss it, run up to Boston or run over to Birmingham. And then we put it together.

I like to write. Once I have the idea, it’s just a matter of putting pen to paper. So when the twenty-four months were up, the dissertation was done and I handed it in.

**N-A:** To their shock?

**LEWIS:** To their shock and amazement, yes.

The head of the department called me her prized pupil. This had never been done that fast in the history of the university, Department of Theology, for what it’s worth. So the short answer is two years in terms of the actually writing.

**N-A:** And then turning it just a bit more personal and bringing it up to present day -- that you did for the book over against the dissertation?

**LEWIS:** That was done in a matter of months.

**N-A:** What individuals and institutions were crucial toward this work?

**LEWIS:** Institutions -- The Archives of the Episcopal Church in Austin were absolutely indispensable because they had a lot information about African Americans in the Episcopal Church, boxes of things, of records, and so on. So that was one.

In terms of individuals -- I’m [Track 4] very grateful that when I did my research -- I was going through my introduction in which I thank the various people who helped me and they almost all now have died. People like Austin Cooper who was, I believe, President of the UBE at one point. No, he was Secretary, he was actually Secretary; excellent, excellent, thorough minutes of every meeting that took place. So I interviewed him. I interviewed bishops like Bishop Burgess, who would just have a wealth of information, John Burgess, from being around as well. Bishop [Clarence] Coleridge was helpful. As was Bishop [Quintin] Primo. Bishop [Walter] Dennis was a wealth of information and was very helpful to me at 815 [Episcopal Church Center, 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY], as well. A lot of those people were just very helpful. And Bishop Martin was another. He had been, like so many of them, active in the Conference of Church Workers Among Colored People. So just to hear-- People like Fred Williams, one of the founders of the UBE. People who were there, Shelton Pollen; John Walker, you know what I mean. So talking to
them, or in the few cases reading what they had written-- And I’m glad that-- You know--

Black people are accused of not writing things down, we’re too oral and pass it on, but we don’t have a record. But that was not the case in terms of the history of black Episcopalians, there was a lot written down. Again, Carleton Hayden’s works were very helpful because he has written umpteen articles in the ATR [Anglican Theological Review], in the Episcopal and Anglican History and other places and on various aspects of slavery and blacks of the South, the history of St. Paul’s College, and the history of several famous people in the Church. So those were some of the people that were really very helpful to me and I’m very grateful to have talked to them.

N-A: Seems like you did choose a really good time (Yes, right). because you got to sit with these people and hear upon their own mouths as well as receive some materials. (Absolutely) And most everyone that you’ve named has (Yes) gone on. This may be the same question, but I’m wondering what kinds of sources were particularly helpful?

LEWIS: Again, the information at the Archives-- Oh, one person I have to mention very loudly is Canon Tom Logan. Because Father Logan is I think now 98. He is one of the people who has not died, although he’s older than most of the people who were alive and everything. I went to his house outside of Philadelphia and it’s a treasure trove. Almost all of the pictures in the book are from his personal collection. He threw away nothing. And of course he knew the Conference of Church Workers Among Colored People intimately. His father had been a priest. His brother had been a priest. His son is a priest. So they are just immersed in the work of the Church. So he should have been the first person I should’ve mentioned. So his sources, both in terms of written things, programs, and photographs, an amazing collection of photographs which tell the story in their own way. So that was another invaluable source that I had and I’m very grateful to Tom Logan.

N-A: Father Logan was good enough to turn his holdings over to us.

LEWIS: Oh, good.

N-A: So they are now part of the African American Episcopal Historical Collection.

LEWIS: I’m glad to hear that, yes.

N-A: So I know the things that you’re speaking (Right. Oh, good.) because I’ve put my hands on them and read them and seen them. Knowing how history works and how records work and documents work and etc., were there resources that you wish had been available that were not for one reason or another?

LEWIS: [Track 5] I can’t say that. I think-- I mean, any book could have been expanded and there is a lot more that could have been said. It’s interesting; I dedicated the book to George Freeman Bragg who was the kind of self-appointed historiographer of black Episcopalians who was the Rector of St. James, Baltimore for almost fifty
years. So he was kind of like my role model in some ways. So I had certain ideas and then those ideas were supported usually by the information I came across and cracks in the story. Now, Father Bragg had written his history of black Episcopalians in 1923, so seventy years had elapsed. So I think, you know, it was about time to write another one. But amazingly enough, as soon as it came out, as soon as my book came out, there was a chorus of people who, some of whom had serious reservations about the book. It was too clerical, that is to say it didn’t give enough recognition to lay men and women in the Church. Or it was too this, and too that, or too critical of certain people. So I was amazed at how much they had to write in criticism. I mean, if they had decided to write an article or a book, they could have done that. So I didn’t-- I found the information that I came across basically sufficient for what I had to show. And that is why blacks remain in the Episcopal Church. So I could’ve found more and if I-- I came across things later which I would’ve used had I known they were there. But it wasn’t so much for lack of their existence so much as the fact that I just didn’t come across everything.

N-A: Did your research turn up anything that surprised you?

LEWIS: Yes. I think one of things about which I didn’t know a great deal was how African Americans had been missionaries to Africa. Now I knew there were people like Samuel Ferguson, who was the Bishop of Liberia at one point. But there’s a whole school, which I believe was chartered out of Grace Church, New York, which trained black clergy for overseas ministry. You see, I think what the Church did, first it justified bringing people from Africa for slavery on the pretense that we could civilize them and give them true religion. And then after slavery was over and they had been imbued with the faith, it was now a time to send blacks back to Africa. Of course not literally back because these people had never been, but back to where their roots are to help their unfortunate cousins who had not yet heard the gospel. And so this is how Liberia, of course, was founded. So there was a-- Because there was so, how should I put it-- Burkett at Harvard pointed out that there was something like twenty-five priests of color ordained between Absalom Jones and the Civil War, which is not a whole bunch. A goodly number of them came from the West Indies and most of them were dispatched to Africa because there was no place for them to go. Most African American parishes were founded after the Civil War, with a few exceptions like St. Thomas, obviously, and St. Philip’s, St. Luke’s New Haven, in the 1840s. So there was no place to go. So that was a bit of a surprise.

Although I was aware of the influence of West Indians in the Episcopal Church, I learned more about it that I knew there was. I mean in terms of the systematic use of clergy, that is to say, you see, the church in the West Indies was just as racist in that they didn’t want to raise up indigenous leadership either because they felt the English could [Track 6] do a better job. So they, the men that went to Cuttington College were often dispatched either to the United States or to Africa. So there was this great triangle route, you know. The role, the very influential role of the West Indians, people like Fr. [Henry Laird] Philips who was the Archdeacon of Philadelphia-- I remember him because he died in the year I was born, 1947. And he ruled with an iron fist and he’s just but one example.

N-A: Anything else surprising?
LEWIS: I think the-- What I learned was how the Church, when I say the Church I mean in its corporate structure, General Convention officialdom, and so on, was so reluctant, I mean I knew this was true, but I didn’t know to what extent it was true, to really incorporate people of color into the mainstream of the Church. Quite willing to establish congregations and institutions for us, but--

Also I think the great learning came across to me as the different standards that white and black Episcopalians brought to the table. That is to say there was-- In the 1930s-- One thing had not changed, the Church is constantly establishing commissions and committees to look into problems. And so there was a commission on the status of the Negro. And so it basically came up with the conclusion that Negro people were just fine. You know, they had the same rights and privileges, and so on, as white people and they seem to be doing all right, and so on and so forth. What that meant was-- It’s kind of like an example of “what do you people want?” Because you could be a priest, you could have a congregation and the same. But the problem is the fact that there were colored convocations, you know what I mean. And these black people could not vote or take part in the diocesan conventions, didn’t seem to bother the white establishment. As long you were separate but unequal, that was fine. And black people said no, catholicity means something a little different than that and we want to be part of the whole thing and not just put out in a corner. And this was a constant issue.

One of the things that I learned along the way is comparing-- I always think it’s somewhat dangerous, but it’s inevitable to compare the women’s struggle and the black struggle. In some ways, and this is one learning that came up out of there, the women-- Women had a harder way to go. A lot of people forget that-- We talk about 1970. 1970 the Convention was in Houston. Interestingly enough it was supposed to be in Houston in 1955, but the Bishop of Texas could not guarantee accommodations for Negroes. But again, the Church says oh well, too bad and they were planning to have it there anyhow. But a delegation including Tollie Caution and Thurgood Marshall, who was a member of St. Philip’s, Harlem, went to Presiding Bishop [Henry Knox] Sherrill and protested it and it met in Honolulu that year. So anyhow, back to 1970, that was the year, lest we forget, not only women allowed to be ordained deacon, but that was the year that women were allowed to be seated as lay deputies to Convention. You know, people forget that. And there was an absolute-- There were a few smatterings of black deputies here and there, men of course, but no women for years and years and years. One delegation, I think it was Missouri, actually elected women and sent them to Convention and the first order of business was to unseat them. The person who moved the resolution said, laymen means lay men, you know, good bye. Why do women have a harder way to go? Because black [Track 7] people could be separated and segregated and put in a little chapel someplace, but the white women about whom they were speaking were the daughters and the wives and the mothers and nieces, and so on, of these white men who did not want to share power with them.

So the parallelism of the issues of discrimination against other groups is something that I learned inadvertently, so to speak, in the process, but it was very instructive.
N-A: What was most challenging or most difficult as you did the research?

LEWIS: I think the greatest challenge, was to kind of synthesize things and put it together in such a way as to answer the question: Why do black people bravely remain in the Episcopal Church? And to stay on point.

I started the book off with the quote attributed to Booker T. Washington. He says, “Anybody who’s a black man and not a Methodist or a Baptist, somebody has been tampering with his religion.” One of the things I discovered—Again, these things I knew about intuitively or heard of, but I didn’t realize how documented and how entrenched it was. But the bias against black Episcopalians, you know what I mean, that is to say the contempt with which we are held, and that may not be too strong a word, by blacks in other denominations and black denominations who feel we have sold out. But even more so, or at least as much, there was contempt even from within the Church. Okay? The white establishment.

In other words, South Bend—The General Convention, the special convention that took place in I think ’69. That was the year of the General Convention Special Program and that was the year—Bishop Hines had in the previous convention in Seattle talked about actually putting our money where our mouth is and helping poor neighborhoods and people of color and the Church’s money would be helping them. And he almost got lynched. People went away in a huff. But when it came time to give the money to a group, there was an established group of black Episcopal clergy who were working in the inner city and no, they ignored them and gave the money to this neighborhood group which basically were AME people and Baptist people and so on and so forth. Again, suggesting that they knew more about the black experience than our own people.

The Episcopal Church has looked at black people as something of an anomaly sometimes. And then found it very difficult to raise up its own black people. What the Church has done, you see, is raise up people in two different categories: Africans, African Anglicans. They have become very fond of Desmond Tutu of Festo Kivengere, we fly them in because they have to go back home, you see. We can lionize them, ain’t it wonderful, how exciting. Or they raise up blacks from other denominations. You know, we had a great love affair with Jim Forbes, who is a wonderful man and wonderful preacher. I mean a masterful preacher, and so on. But we never heard of our own.

I have letters, some of them I should send to your collection, of complaints that I wrote. I mean I wrote to Trinity Institute and I said why is it that you have never had an African American speaker or presenter? The first black priest ever to be a preacher or a leader at Trinity was Michael Curry after he became Bishop of North Carolina. I remember writing a letter to Ed Romig who was Rector, of blessed memory, the Rector of Epiphany here [Washington, D.C.], because he had one of the few daily Lenten preaching series. [Track 8] And I had been in the diocese for so many years, not one black face except for Bishop [John T.] Walker, but then I told him that didn’t count because the bishops of the diocese were always in Holy Week. So he was there by default. Of course what happened is that he then asked me if I would be the preacher.
Is it [Ralph] Ellison that wrote *Invisible Man*? We can be invisible even in our own church, but for a few of us who had just reminded people of our presence. So I think one of the surprises was to find out just how entrenched that was. That wasn’t just part of the culture. It wasn’t just a feeling. It was supported by the Church’s policies and rules and regulations and so on.

The other thing is that the Church is slow, you know what I mean, “Like the mighty tortoise moves the church of God, brothers we are treading where we’ve always trod,” you know. I was speaking to a lady in South Carolina and she was telling me about the colored convocations. She had been-- South Carolina was the place of the last colored convocation in 1955, you know, after Brown vs. Board of Education. So it’s not ancient history, it’s in my living memory. But she said that after they decided they shouldn’t have these colored convocations anymore they desegregated in stages. First they said fine, come to the convention with us and so on and so forth. Then they gradually allowed blacks to come to the worship service, because in those days there were either two [services] or blacks were in the back and received communion afterwards. But she said the last thing to integrate was the diocesan banquet because-- What we then called the women’s auxiliary, would be the servers. And they were all white ladies so they could not, of course, serve “nigras.” Then she said, I think it was South Carolina, where the Bishop’s wife just took a plate to a black a person and that was the end of the story. So these things--

It’s amazing, here we are in the year that black president has been elected. I was interviewed about that by the *Church Times* in London, of all people and all places. And I found myself saying, now that that has happened there shouldn’t be any dispute or debate about black anything, do you know what I mean. I’ve been the Rector of Calvary Church for twelve years and it was front page news when I got there because-- And the paper said “White parish calls black rector.” That was still news. And I think that type of thing is less and less news now, and should be no news now at all. It should be a non-issue. One person said to me, Calvary should feel proud that you are their Obama.

The long and the short of it is I-- One of things I don’t think I say in this book, I don’t think I do, but I do say it in one of my other books, two other books *Christian Social Witness* and *Elijah’s Mantle*, and the story of how when I went for an interview at Berkeley, the professor asked me if it ever occurred to me that Episcopal Church doesn’t particularly like me? And I said no, no it never did occur to me. It didn’t occur to me because I grew in St. Philip’s, Brooklyn, with three priests and 2000 people, everybody black. The only white Episcopalian I ever saw was the Bishop of Long Island. So it was kind of like the experience of the West Indies, you know, I mean everybody was black. I realized what the professor was saying. He was giving me a reality check because he knew that I would-- I integrated my class at Berkeley, you know, so he knew there would be issues and-- And when I interviewed I was twenty-one years old, so what did I know? And he knew that I was still wet behind the ears and I would have some rude awakenings at seminary, which I did.
It was amazing. There was no quota system I don’t think, [Track 9] but as it turned out there was one black person per class. And so God forbid we should all be in the same place, you know. Because people say, are you plotting the revolution? And I would say, yes, as a matter of fact. Or Vic Lawson who was the year ahead of me would go to the common room and he’d play the piano and do Duke Ellington. And I’d come the next day and play Chopin and it was just-- They couldn’t put you in a box. So it was a great learning experience for everyone concerned.

N-A: Can you name a thing or two or three that you think is most important for the Church at large to know about the history of black Episcopalians in this church?

LEWIS: [Long pause.]
One, to iterate what I said before, is the gift of catholicity. I think the Church always had a certain claim that-- I mean, for instance, the famous boast is that unlike the Presbyterians, or the Methodists, or others who divided at the time of Civil War we’ve, you know, have always been one church. That, or course, is not entirely true. The Confederate Episcopal Church was formed; we just refused to recognize them as a bona fide entity. But the black Episcopalians have always said, Look at what you have said about what the Church is. This is how it should be implemented. This is what it would be like if you lived into that promise. And I think that’s been like the steady beat, that’s been the leitmotif, that’s been the theme song of black Episcopalians, all along. And as I said, it paid off. Not in terms of just black people being accepted or being ordained bishop or whatever, it would be hauled up as a criterion, but giving the Church a sense of who she is.

I think too, the Episcopal Church is unique in that-- Well as I said once, the founding fathers drew up the Constitution one afternoon and then ran across the street and founded the Episcopal Church, so we have this symbiotic relationship with the Republic. And with all that, the racial attitudes of the nation and the Church are kind of one. So we have as black people kind of held up the banner and held the Church’s feet to the fire in terms of carving out our identity in a way that other blacks have not had to. Not to denigrate their experience, but it’s just different.

I think too, when I think of black Episcopalians I just think of the stalwarts, you know. People like Artemisia Bowden, you know what I mean, or Barbara Harris for that matter, you know what I mean, in more modern times. Or Henry Laird Philips. Or the Delanys. Delany and Demby who the first black bishops, they were consecrated suffragans for colored work. I think a lot of people criticized them; they were called the “deaf and dumb” bishops. And they criticized them for taking this subservient role of only being able to minister to blacks. But I think what Delany and Demby did, and again as exemplars of what black Episcopalians have done and you can learn from them, is that they took half a loaf as a down payment on justice, okay. And as I said in Yet with a Steady Beat, they learned that if you want to get to the first class carriage of the train, it is easier to do it from the second class carriage then to [Track 10] take a flying leap from the side of the tracks. And this parallels too, I know I read Mary Donovan’s book on the history of women in the Episcopal Church, and so women too kind of took half a loaf and once they got in then-- So I
think that is— The history of black Episcopalians has been in some ways the history of black Americans, you know what I mean. So there’s a lesson to be learned there.

N-A: You talk a bit in the book about the price they paid?

LEWIS: Yes, because it wasn’t— It was unpopular to challenge the status quo. I have learned that, you know, in my own life. But I just can’t help myself, you know what I mean. I just feel I have to call a spade a spade, let chips fall where they may. The other thing is that the leaders of the Conference of Church Workers and others were erudite, well-seasoned, brilliant guys, you know what I mean. I mean when you read the stuff that they wrote, you know what I mean, they could turn a phrase. It was eloquent; it wasn’t just bombastic or challenging. It was impeccable prose, you know I mean. I just have a great love of language so I appreciate that. You know immediately why initially they didn’t want us to learn how to read and write. Once we did, you know, we kind of took over. So I think those are some of the enlightening things we’ve learned about blacks.

N-A: Perhaps you alluded to this a bit earlier, but I’m wondering, did Yet with a Steady Beat alter your own life and your own ministry?

LEWIS: My goodness.

N-A: And if so, how?

LEWIS: It’s funny, a lot of things, everything alters your life in ministry in many ways, some more than others. And I think eleven years I spent at 815, was a challenging experience. I went there— Frank Turner was another one of my great mentors, someone whom I’ve talked with about this book and he was in charge of the office and I was on the Commission of Black Ministries at the time. So when the Commission of Black Ministries members and the UBE board were all polled, everyone wanted me to succeed Frank. It was a mandate so to speak. When I went to see [Presiding] Bishop [John] Allin he said, I’ve heard so many good things about you; I’ve decided to make some discreet inquiries of my own. And I said, so I still got the job?

I think the people who know me would not, in those days, call me a militant, I probably am, but militant then meant you had to have a dashiki and afro and clench your fist all the time, and so on and so forth, and that was not my style. I was a quiet version of that. But I was the official Negro of the Episcopal Church. I mean, I was the spokesperson for blackness, and for black and white relations, and it turns out a pan-African or a Diaspora thing, you know. So I was it, you know what I mean. So there’s a sense in which that kind of image type-casts one.

I remember I was a candidate to be Bishop Coadjutor of Michigan. So we were going through the week of walkabouts and one of the women said, how can you possibly expect to come to minister to this diocese [Track 11], which is mostly white, if you are in charge of Black Ministries? And I thought it was a very odd question, but I realized— So I said, that is what I do, it’s not what I am. I mean, if I were an expert on World War II, it wouldn’t mean that I had not heard of the
Peloponnesian Wars, you see. But her question was insightful. So much so that I realized that at least she had the courage to articulate it, other people would think it and go about their business, and not vote for you.

So I found myself answering the unasked question, do you know what I mean because I think it was on people’s minds. So I think there was a sense of which it just makes you just -- Blackness is your stock in trade, do you now what I mean. At the exclusion ____+, but at the exclusion of anything else. You know, just the usual, what do you call it, skills and talents and gifts of ministry. So to that extent, the book in some ways cemented that. You know, know it’s in print.

There were people, black and white, in the Church who did not fare favorably in my book, you know. I came across only yesterday, only yesterday, a document, which I suppose you have, it was a special issue of *Linkage* after I left and it was called “Reactions to *Yet with a Steady Beat*.” Have you ever seen it?

**N-A:** I have not.

**LEWIS:** The Office of Black Ministries, which was then in interregnum, but basically run by Diane Porter who was the head of the unit, published a series of essays about this book. Everybody was identified: Barbara Harris; Juan Williams was there; Al Moss, professor of history, University of Maryland; Barbara Harris such and such, Bishop Suffragan. No where did it say who Harold Lewis was. It just said Harold Lewis’ book, it didn’t say that I was Staff officer Black Ministries, didn’t say I was a priest in the Episcopal Church, or as George Brandt would say, didn’t say dog/cat. And a lot of it was very critical. And somebody who went to a great deal of expense and bother to criticize more than critique the book. It was a painful experience in a way because I thought I had made a contribution to the life of the Church. John Booty, you know the historian for the Episcopal Church, said that every Episcopalian should read it, you know what I mean. And here are black people basically saying it was deficient because it didn’t do this, it didn’t do that, or it was too critical of this or that person. So I think there are people who, including the then Presiding Bishop who did not appreciate what I had to say.

But, as I pointed out, while they complained there was not one libel suit. There was nothing untrue, you know what I mean. Everything was documented. Arthur Williams, retired Suffragan of Ohio, said that one day he just read the footnotes. He said the footnotes made a story of their own. So I think that changed my life, it challenged, you know all these things.

At the same time it also, on the positive side, it sold well, as these things go. I’m still pleased to know that it’s still being used as a textbook in most seminaries, as is *Christian Social Witness*. So I think there is a legacy for the Church. I think it was Cheryl Parish who wrote to ask me when the sequel was coming out. Because I mean ’96 was ancient history now, in terms of what has happened among black Episcopalians since. So I don’t know if I should do it, but somebody should do it. You know, to update it. We don’t want to wait another seventy years, like between Bragg and Lewis.
But interestingly enough, here’s another twist, it came out, the book came out as I remember-- I think I made a mistake, I graduated in '94 from University of Birmingham. I entered in '92, came out in '94. Because the book came out in '96. So it was in '96 that the search committee for Calvary Church was looking for a rector and they came to visit me at St. Mark’s, Brooklyn, where I was interim Rector. And the book had just come out and they were reading it. They said they were passing it around on the plane. And I was talking about the big section about deployment and how when Barbara Harris was consecrated Paul Washington preached, then Rector of Advocate, Philadelphia. And he said there had been fewer black rectors of white congregations then there had been bishops, and why is that? And I made the point that a bishop is like an eccentric uncle, or aunt now, I guess, because they come once a year, take out the good china, you know, give a little gift, make a big fuss and send them on their way and don’t worry about them for another year. (You don’t have to live with them day to day.) Right. But day to day, when a rector has to bury your mother, you know what I mean, and handle your endowment, it becomes very personal. And that kind of intimacy is unknown. Not unknown, but not the norm in black and white relations.

When Calvary asked me if I thought I could adjust because it’s a mostly white parish, I said adjust? I’ve been adjusting to white people all my life, can you adjust to me? I said look at it this way, the last time I looked the white man was still in charge. And it behooves me as a black man to learn what’s going on in your world or to function in it. The converse is not true. I said, for me to learn about you is a required course, but people learning about me is an elective. And they never asked the question again. So the biggest question people have asked, how have I gotten along at Calvary? Fine is the answer.

The issue has been more cultural than racial, you know what I mean. That is to say, the race issue is a non-issue now, a complete non-issue I would say. I’m part of the furniture. But initially the biggest adjustment I had to -- I had never been at a parish where I was called by my Christian name before, never ever, you know what I mean. Or for that matter, where I called people by their Christian names because even at St. Mark’s [Brooklyn, NY] people on the vestry new each other for 30 years they’re still Mrs. Smith, Fr. Jones, Dr. So-and-so. Somebody said, well we dropped those things long ago. I said well you had these titles to drop, we just got ours. So it’s been a learning experience for them really, in ways.

So that’s an interesting question about how it affected my persona, so to speak. It did encourage me to write more and so I’ve come out with a few more books.

N-A: The book came out of your own passion was a good encouragement and I would say is a fine piece of work. You spoke of the pain as people sort of attacked it. You didn’t use the word gratuitously, but no one had written a something (Right.) and the people who were leveling their criticism also weren’t producing alternatives. It is now thirteen years later? '96 to 2009. Are you glad that you wrote Yet with a Steady Beat?

LEWIS: Oh, absolutely! I have no regrets. I didn’t have any then. In fact, you know like they said in Hollywood no publicity is bad publicity; three divorces is just fine
because you’re in the news. So likewise--  Bad analogy perhaps. I guess it was 
better to get, you know, the kind of criticism I got than to be ignored. It showed that 
it was taken seriously. I think it was taken seriously. [Track 13] I still am surprised, 
I shouldn’t be, but--  I’ll read some article some place and people will quote me in 
the book. And quote it as gospel, you know, Lewis said that, end of story. Okay. So 
it’s humbling. Ann Roebuck [Staff Officer & Director of Special Events, Virginia 
Theological Seminary] called yesterday, or a few days ago rather, to ask my 
permission to use my hymn at the service tonight, which I get all the time. My wife 
thinks that to have your hymns sung after you die - I’m not dead yet - is a legacy of 
another sort.

N-A: My last question is in a slightly different vein. I’m wondering what, with all 
that you have done, all that you have run across, and read, and the people that 
you’ve gotten to speak to, what would you say black Episcopalians, as 
individuals and as congregations, can do to help document and preserve our 
own history? What kinds of things should ordinary folk or the congregations be 
doing so that when someone comes fifty years from now to do another chapter 
in our history that person will find the source of things that will feed the work?

LEWIS: Well, before I answer the question, the task is daunting nowadays in a way that it 
wasn’t before because--  You know, not that long ago, if you look in the red book 
next to certain parishes there was a C in parentheses and that meant “Colored.” Even 
when I was in Washington, I came here in ’73, I had been ordained two years and 
came to St. Monica’s, but there were several flourishing black parishes all of whom 
were under black leadership. You know St. George’s, and St. Luke’s, and 
Atonement, and Calvary. We had eleven preaching services every Lent. So 
Carleton tells me now that the parishes are suffering--

Well, when I was a candidate for bishop here I had a rude awakening because when 
somebody black would tell that they were from some suburban Maryland parish, I 
said to myself, you couldn’t be from there, there are no black people there. But 
things have changed. You know why they have changed? Because Africans and 
West Indians came to greater Washington, moved to the suburbs and went to the 
nearest Episcopal Church because that’s what they do. They didn’t know that they 
weren’t supposed to be there.

So what I’m saying is that--  Whereas at one time the black people from Silver 
Spring would have come down to St. George’s on Sunday morning, now they just go 
to the local church. Which is fine, as it should be. Because we’re no longer as 
segregated as we were. But it does mean a weakening of the black parish. This is 
just a reflection of what’s going on in general. I mean there was time when if you 
were a John Hope Franklin you had to be at Howard. Okay? Now you’re at the 
University of Chicago. So there wasn’t the concentration of the brain trust at 
Howard or Fisk or whatever.

So the challenge is greater because our parishes being weakened and we’re not 
raising up the black clergy that we need to be raising up in the numbers that we need 
to be raising them. And then the people who are coming up, a lot of them, Tollie 
Caution doesn’t mean anything to them; Harold Lewis doesn’t mean anything to
them. They didn’t -- There is no folklore that connects them to the history of black Episcopalians because they didn’t come out of a black parish, you know what I mean. So be that as it may.

But to the extent that our black parishes [Track 14] I think to be assiduous about putting things in writing. We do have this problem culturally being an oral people. So if you record everything you do-- Vestry minutes, you know what I mean. Make sure-- We have an archivist for instance at Calvary Church, you know. We have every minute of every vestry [meeting] since 1855, you know what I mean. And if you want the bulletin for the seventeenth Sunday after Trinity twenty-five years ago, there it is. Not to mention the tape, you know. And we’re very fortunate. But I think we should be more assiduous in that regard ‘cause you never know when these things will be important. Well they’re important now, but when somebody might have to-- When the next person, you know, does the history, hopefully not seventy years from now, they can do that. So I think to document everything and write it down and record it and send it to you, now that there is a place for it to be.

[cell phone rings-recording stopped]

[Track 15]

N-A: Anything else?

LEWIS: Well, I’m just glad to be here, thank you for this opportunity. As I said, I feel old [laughs]. You always talk about oral histories, “Oh my God, hurry up and get it before he dies or it will be lost forever.” And I will be happy to send stuff here such as I have-- (That would be wonderful) I’ll start now--

N-A: And there are many more things we have to talk about so we can plan another time. It would make a set of interviews to talk about your eleven years at 815 and various other and sundry things--

LEWIS: And also the Calvary experience, you know what I mean, I think it’s-- It’s hardly unique but it’s still newsworthy, I mean there’s still something people can learn from it and so on, so we’ll see.

N-A: We would be happy to receive your papers and happy to sit down again.

LEWIS: Okay good. Thank you, I appreciate it.