Abstract
This interview is with Reverend Mel Williams, who was a pastor for over forty years. Reverend Williams’ career began during the 1960s, experiencing the effects of civil rights movements, which shaped his long interest in helping to lift the poor from the poverty. His life work is full of social activism for the impoverished Durham community. Through the years, Reverend Williams has initiated and headed several projects that deal with Durham’s poverty. As a pastor of the Watts Street Baptist Church, he gathered different religions to bring awareness to the poor in their communities.
Reverend Williams’ work includes the Congregations Coalition, End Poverty Durham, the Walltown “Neighbor to Neighbor” mission, and the Coalition for Non-Violent Durham. Many of these projects have enriched community programs for the unemployed - providing training and jobs and addressing how to fulfill basic needs. In addition, Reverend Williams shares here his inspirational moments and the spiritual sources for his long life of community work.

Key Terms
00:00:32 Aberdeen, segregated community, poor
00:00:27 inclusion, 1963, to seat blacks in sanctuary or balcony
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SAM SELIG:
This is Batya Knebel and Sam Selig interviewing Reverend Mel Williams on March 4th, 2014 in Durham, NC. This interview is going to be archived and discussing social activism in Durham and the surrounding area. So thank you for joining us Reverend Mel Williams.
To start us off would you mind kind of talking about early childhood, where you were in the community and maybe your family conditions and anything you find important.

REVEREND MEL WILLIAMS:
I grew up in a small town called Aberdeen, near Southern Pines Pinehurst about 1,500 people, I am the oldest of four boys in a working class family; Small community where we knew everyone, and church and the school were the center of our lives. It was a segregated community at that time. My family I wouldn't say that we were poor but we were probably one paycheck away from going away to live with aunt Thelma, because the family had no savings. But, we had a wonderful family, and parents who cared a lot about us. I was fortunate to grow up in that small town. My family I guess, in terms of influence on me, they were people of compassion and I would say inclusion.
One major event that happened, I guess, by that time I had gone to college we didn’t have money for school but I managed a scholarship and work through the year, and in the summers. 1963 my church took a vote on whether to seat blacks in the sanctuary or in the balcony and voted no to both. And my pastor the next Sunday resigned, he said "I can not in good conscience serve a congregation that will make that decision". He had a wife and six children and no where to go. So that was a pivotal moment because he was my mentor, my role model Denny Spear (spelling- s p e a r) was his name.
So That event happening in 1963 was an important event, I was a student at that time at Wake Forest university in Winston Salem and I think it was that year or the year before that Martin Luther King also spoke in Wake Chapel at Wake Forest and one of the things that he said that I remember was that “the church has been a tail light in race relation when it should be a head light”. And so I think through those events I resolved then that in my work as a minister as a pastor I would do what ever I could to bring about racial reconciliation and so that has been an
important part of my work and then also since I grew up I would say on the edge of poverty that the whole intersection of poverty and race has been important to me since my growing up years in Aberdeen.

**BATYA KNEBEL:**

00:03:22 So basically it sounds like these events had a big impact on you, did you form your decision to do religious work as a result of that? Was it your inclination to do so as a result of a supportive community you had? And how did you feel as a young man entering the ministry and church assignment in those years?

**WILLIAMS:**

00:03:50 This was the 1960's so unrest was in the air and then the Vietnam War was in the air so I think my formation happened in the middle of that activism. So the racial issue was very important; At Wake Forest one of my good friends was the first African American student at wake forest. He came from Gahanna as product of mission work, that was one way we could integrate Wake Forest at that time but Edward Reynolds became my good friend. So my mentor Denny Spear, his decision of conscience in resigning from the church had a big impact on me because I think that the ethical dimensions of faith became crucial to me and then after Wake Forest I didn't have money so I was working for a year but a man in my home town called me to his home and he said I'm concern you are staying out here, he knew I was going to be a minister and I said well I figured could save $500 because I could afford to go to South Eastern Seminary which is the little seminary over at Wake Forest, North Carolina.

And he said, "I don't want you to worry about money, I want to be your financial daddy". He said "your father has his hands full with three other children behind him", he knew we were on meager resources. So I was shocked at that event, and I said "you mean I could go to.. Could I apply at any school?" He said, "You pick the school and don't worry about the money". So I went to Yale divinity school because of Jack Taylor. Now he's a person who believed in me and he said G-d has been good to me with financial resources, so he said "I want to help you, if you can pay it back, you'll help some other people."

But that event was another major change in my life because he sent me, I mean I applied at Union and Yale and chose to go to Yale. And this was at a time when Bill Coffin was the Chaplain at
Yale and the Vietnam War was raging, and there were students’ protests and people turning in draft cards. And so Bill Coffin was a major influence during that time because he had also been a freedom writer and a Mississippi and was a strong spokesperson for justice and for peace at that time. So Jack Taylor’s influence in sending me there which took me out of my provincial small town and any kind of narrow Baptist view, because there I was a part of a student body with a Episcopalians and Presbyterian, people from Great Lutherans from a variety of backgrounds and that strong activism there. And I learned there too from Bill Coffin who said, "Okay if you're going to take stands on controversial issues the important thing is to be a good pastor. Because when you take a stand on the pulpit on some issue he said, people will say he was there when grandmother died so I don’t care what he says from the pulpit, he’s still my pastor." So I learned from him to be a good pastor and build relationships, and that then made it possible to take stands on various social issues. I was fortunate then to go to Pullen Memorial Baptist church in Raleigh and Bill Finlator– W.W. Finlator was the pastor there and he was another outspoken prophetic minister because he was involved in race relations and supporting trade unions and opposing the Vietnam War. And so I helped to run the church that made Bill’s ministry possible that I learned a lot from him because he was a rag tag prophet always downtown demonstrating every week against the Vietnam War. In fact when I first arrived people told me that they sent a delegation from the deacons to talk to him because every Sunday he was railing against the Vietnam War. So Wade Smith who’s my good friend, singing buddy, in Raleigh was chair of deacons and so he held a meeting with pastor Finlator and said, “We’re here pastor Finlator, people they would like to hear a bit more about G-d and Jesus and maybe a little less about the Vietnam War.” And he was very gracious, a southern gentleman “thank you so much for coming”. And so he (Wade Smith) said, “Reverend Finlator would you lead us in prayer before we go.” And (Rev Finlator) said, “Pray G-d thank you for these good people who’ve come to talk and help me to keep saying what you want me to say even if everybody leaves the church.” So you can see the kind of a force that Bill Finlator had because he was even saying publicly that the federal governments should withdraw funds from the University of North Carolina because they it hasn’t lived up to the racial reconciliation policy that’s required. So he offended some people, but I learned a lot from him about taking stands for peace and justice.
SELIG:
00:09:43 I’d like to jump back to Wake Forest; here it says you were..

WILLIAMS:
00:09:50?? We want all people regardless of sexual orientation or race or class to be involved in the church. So the result was a film and once people saw that film they said it's a no brainer. The film, talking about social change Bruce, the film really helped the congregation then take next step, and after the film we took a vote for an official policy. That was the result of a film with lights like this. For the sake of you guys we just made hundreds of copies of that film and distributed it all over the congregation who would go home and watch it and hear some of their, people that they knew, talk very openly and honestly about their relative who was gay and what it's like for them. And it was a very, very helpful tool in bringing about change in the congregation. So it's related to your course. We should have come over here and helped you coach us how to do it. (Laughter). They figured it out how to do it for themselves.

SELIG:
00:10:52 I'm going to jump back here for a second; talking your friendship with Edward Reynolds at Wake forest. Just kind of curious to see if there were any times where as he was the first African American student, where there ever run-ins over the race issue or just discussing the desegregation of Wake Forest.

WILLIAMS:
00:11:12 Well there were certainly some cat-calls and negative things. But one of the things we decided the group of us who lived with him was that we were going to be his support system if not his ‘bodyguards’. So anytime we went across campus to the cafeteria to eat we would be a bunch of us surrounding him and became his support system so he certainly got some negative but also he was from Ghana and he spoke with a bit of a British accent and it made him bit maybe easier to accept. He was such a wonderful person and so very smart, he ended up at Yale Divinity School, a classmate along with me. Then he got a masters degree from Ohio University, then he got a PHD from London economics and has had a teaching career at the University of California. So he has been a remarkable person, so yes there were some I guess minor incidents, but the time was right and folks knew it was the right thing to do, for him to be
there. So he paved the way but I was glad to be apart of his support team.

**KNEBEL:**  
00:12:26  So Reverend you have served 24 years as a pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, from ‘88 to 2012. Can you tell us what do you remember, how Durham looked like since 1988, whatever you feel like mentioning. What was the atmosphere on the streets, events that started the concern for poverty, why and how?

**WILLIAMS:**  
00:12:57  Okay, well when I first got here, I knew about Watts Street because it was a sister church to Pullen where I had served the first ten years. Then I had gone to Atlanta to Oakhurst Baptist church was 2 miles from Emory University and so I knew about Watts Street because of its similarity to Pullen and Binkley in Chapel Hill. So I was glad to come; we had small children and we wanted them to grow up in a smaller place and I knew about Watts street's openness and especially involvement in the community. Durham was changing, and when I first came the smell of Tobacco was in the air, you could still smell it. Sam, were you around then?

**Sam:**  
00:13:42  Not yet.  
(Laughter)

**WILLIAMS:**  
00:13:44  Well it began finally that all the tobacco left by say 1990 probably but then you had the blight downtown what is now American tobacco complex was just blight, was just buildings with busted windows it looked just awful. Durham was also still trying to overcome the image of being a crime ridden city and the education system not so great. So in the ensuing years we have seen massive change downtown when I first got here, people were fleeing downtown. Now, people can't wait to move back downtown because it's where the action is so you have this renaissance that's happened in Durham. But when I first got here the whole thing about crime I had lived in Raleigh for ten years and people there told me you know it's farther from Raleigh to Durham than it is from Durham to Raleigh. That was one of my church members who said that. So Durham had this reputation to overcome.
Well one of the first things that drew my attention here was the gun violence one of my members, Leslie Dunbar, and I’ve mentioned him to Bruce before just a wonderful civil rights, major civil rights leader, in the early 1960’s so he moved here to retire. And so he said to me one day can you help us do something about gun violence in Durham, can you get the faith community involved. That was 1990-91, that was also about the time I guess I was president during congregations in action which is now a 62 congregation coalition, we can get back to that. But, Gun violence, so Leslie and I, we started meeting and we said "what can we do about gun violence?" And I think you mentioned about Fredrick Davis, so Fredrick we've called a press conference and to announce we are going to begin this organization at that time we were saying religious coalition for hand gun control. We were saying leave hunting rifles alone, we just don't think hand guns have a place in public places and so we formed the group and began regular meetings. And we found Marsha Owen who would be another person, good person for you to talk to, who became at that time our outreach coordinator, and we became the religious coalition for a non-violent Durham. And that's the group we started holding vigils at the sight of every violent death, every murder in the city and in fact tonight at 7:00 o’clock there will be an annual vigil which we started twenty years ago when we read the names of every person who's been killed in the past year to remember them and really to call again for the peace of the city and to say its unacceptable to have 32 murders this past year for example. So there are individual vigils at the site of every violent death and then this annual vigil which will be tonight at 7 at Shepard’s House Church in East Durham. You may know that Sam Wells when he was dean of Duke Chapel wrote a book along with Marsha, an academic with an activist, about the religious coalitions cause Sam Wells said he was looking to see where he thought God was most active in Durham and decided it was a religious coalition for a non-violent Durham. So I've been on that board forever; since 1992 when we started it so seeing the violence, we were also working in Walltown, a low income neighborhood through the religious coalition. And my Walltown work I began to see Okay, that underneath the social difficulties, often is poverty and I think sorting through that and saying ok if poverty is often underlying a number of our social problems whether its gun violence or school drop outs or drug use and so we need to do something about poverty. So that’s when I said to Haywood Holden at Westminster Presbyterian Church one day,
Haywood, how can we get the faith community involved in doing something about poverty? So we'll call a meeting. well we called a meeting and we've been meeting ever since. That was 2004 so we meet monthly and to say okay we know poverty is complex it’s a complicated matter but at the very beginning I said it helps me to think of poverty as my five fingers. That poverty involves education, and housing, and healthcare, and jobs and family support, that is transportation to work and childcare etc... So where do we start? And to a person at the table I guess we had twenty or so at that table from the beginning we said, “Jobs” we got to start with jobs. How can we help our low income neighbors, get and keep living wage jobs. So we began looking for models and that’s when we found the model in Greensboro Welfare formally A-zone project Reverend Odell Cleveland. So we took several loads of people up there and we finally decided okay we want to replicate the model in Durham and so we started Durham Economic Resource Center it's at 118 Hunt St. It’s a distribution center where low income people can buy products at drastically reduced prices but it’s really a carrot for job training. And so since 2008 we've now trained I think two hundred and seventy five people and many of those are right of the homeless shelters, urban ministries, people who have significant challenges whether its substance abuse or perhaps a criminal record but they have gotten job training there and seventy five percent of those who have come through that program have found jobs at further education. So that was the first initiative of End Poverty Durham, and it was greatly helped because through Odell Cleveland, he said you have matched this initiative with a strong African American congregation so we turned to Ken Hammond at Union Baptist Church, they have four or five thousand members and he said “I'm in”. And so he's been the chair of the board from the beginning. And that linking that with that congregation has been a crucial part of making that initiative work.

KNEBEL:
00:20:44 So it sounds like you had a lot of cooperation from cross congregational; how did the ministry in general accepted this? Was there some feedback, did you have any push back from other congregations or was it a really smooth cooperation?

WILLIAMS:
00:21:18 I think we've had a lot of cooperation because one is that we've been at this a long time and there's certainly an advantage of
staying in a community a long time because you get to know a lot of people, and those monthly meetings cause at the table we had folks from Amaca Conception Catholic Church, we had folks from the Presbyterians, and the Methodists, and originally at least one of the Rabbis in town, support from the Muslim community. So from the beginning we said ok we need all of us involved, because one of the things about poverty is we can say, “look we may have theological differences about points of theology or worship styles but all faith traditions have a mandate to care for the poor.” That's one place we can all come together. I’ve said that repeatedly that we need all of us, we need multiple strategies and we need all the faith communities to come together. So I think there’s generally been a very positive response at least in terms of the poverty initiative and certainly there are people who are cynical who make, one of my members jokingly said to me 'now, people in Durham didn't know they were poor until you told them.' Well he likes to make a joke. But, I think most people have been very supportive, now how to do something about it, I think part of it, there are people of good will in Durham, and Sam, I think you will verify this in people that you know. There are people of wonderful good will and resources in Durham so the issue is how can we match resources and I don't mean just money. I mean people power, social capital to invest in people who are. The only reason I can sit here for this interview right now is that there are twenty five or thirty people behind me who made it possible for me to be here. People who are poor, often do not have that support system, they didn't have the Jack Taylor to call you to their house and say I want to support you and get the best education that you can possibly get. So I am very aware that what I have received through the support of all those people behind me that's the same kind of support we need to give to every child in Durham. And so we need to make a concentrated effort to make that happen. It is the investment of social capital that is human energy because anyone of us, and I dare say any of you who have gone to Duke have people who have invested in you and who’ve believed in you and we need to supply that same kind of support for people who are in material poverty. As Cameron Smith likes to remind us there are different kinds of poverty or as Marsha likes to tell us, she said, “what I've learned is about the wealth of the poor and the poverty of the rich”. Because sometimes you can have plenty of money and still be in a kind of poverty. So how do we mobilize I think mobilize not only faith community but other people of good will to join us in this effort.
Because I think what we need is to move from a little campaign to a movement and I have gone back and looked at what happened in 1962 in North Carolina. Terry Sanford was the governor he later became the president of Duke. But he was trying to do something about race and he ran into poverty, so what did he do, he had a very conservative legislature so what did he do, he hired a novelist, John Ehle from Chapel Hill. He hired a novelist! So I’ve said where's Charles Dickens when we need him. I mean he wrote stories about people in poverty and brought about social reform. John Ehle was teaching creative writing at UNC Chapel Hill. Terry Sanford hires him to help him do something about poverty so that's one of the reasons I am interested in you guys because of the creative people who can think outside the box.

John Ehle says Ok let's go to the Ford foundation in NY so bypassing the legislature they go to the Ford foundation and say we want to do something about the poverty in NC. So the Ford foundation gave them eventually, they said we don't want your money we went just to talk, but eventually they gave 8 million and C Smith Reynolds and Babcott foundation supplied but they came up with 15 million dollars in 1962 to launch a state wide effort against poverty. That became the for-runner for Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty because they were watching what was happening in NC. So the organization now under which I hang my hat is MDC which originally was Manpower Development Corporation, but grew out of the NC fund and so a book has been written about that story, *To Write These Wrongs*.

KNEBEL:
We are reading it.

WILLIAMS:
You are reading it! It's a very very important book. I’ve been interested in the role of John Ehle because he was a creative person and I thought Governor Stanford was very wise he didn't pull in a Bureaucrat. He pulled in a novelist and out of that came this ray of progressive actions, the North Carolina fund, the NC School of the Arts, governor’s school, Sanford gifted high school rising seigniors, our son went to that, the North Carolina Community college system. It's been a ray of productive things came out of Sanford’s collaboration with the novelist John Ehle. So I’ve been lately trying to rally novelists that I know, say can we find Charles Dickens what about ideas that novelists have, or
you filmmakers, artists, who can help us with some creative approaches to alleviating poverty.

SELIG:

00:27:31 Would you mind kind of giving us an example of you talked about relocating social capital getting everybody targeted at poverty in general and solving that issue? Could you give us an example of how you go about that and maybe a process that you get people into that?

KNEBEL:

00:27:52 I would like to add to that also, should the model of the religious community that you are alluding to and giving example of can provide the only solution?

WILLIAMS:

00:28:06 I think it has to be broader than the faith community, but I turned to the faith community first because I know there's compassion power and moral power from the faith community, the whole ethical dimension and we could talk about, you know the Bible is just filled with admonitions to just serve the poor and what I say to Christians is look, the very first sentence out of Jesus’s mouth, his very first sentence of his first sermon was “the spirit of the lord is upon me, the lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” The priority is clearly there or ‘God has a preferential option for the poor’- the Latin American theologians. The mandate there is very clear, but I get me back to what you were asking Sam. Ok social capital, the mayor, I don’t know if you all saw this, the mayor called us back in January saying I’m going to make my state of the city address, like the state of the union address and I want to focus on poverty and he asked us to be there. So we have this new initiative called Real Durham which is investing social capital, relationships equipping allies and leaders, it involves a family in poverty and we're going to recruit four allies meeting with this family and we’re starting fifteen circles this spring and so the mayor knew about that program and so now that he’s put his leadership behind poverty efforts I can only be encouraged for example I asked him “we’re looking for a high profile person who can help us rally the business community to get behind this initiative” and he said “I’m in”. I wasn’t asking him, but he's in, so he’s now going to host a breakfast with key religious leaders, And one of those is Terry Sanford Jr, the governor’s son, who developed Erwin's square and Trabourn and other leaders in the
community so but the mayors helped and he’s going to help us I hope, bring more of the business community involved. Just before coming here I just had a meeting with SunTrust for example to talk about how can SunTrust or major banks help us because of with the mayors leadership I hope that's going to bring more people it will be more inviting to say, what the mayor is saying, look what progressive things have happened in downtown Durham, the American tobacco complex, it's a renaissance. Now can we have the same kind of energies going into reducing poverty? So it's networking, right and left networking, so I've been going to Duke community medicine, I first got an appointment with Maryanne Black who's community relations were Duke medical center, and got a meeting with Dr. Zowe I know who's leaving now, but the result of that even now at Duke community medicine to get a health component in this Real Durham initiative and to explore the possibility of a congregational health network. Again health is a crucial piece in the poverty puzzle, but if we can empower little congregations certainly in under served areas and with the help of Duke Medical center because there's a model in Memphis called the Memphis Model and they have five hundred congregations and a covenant with a hospital. So if we can develop something like that in Durham to empower congregations and the hospital encourage them and supply a training for them so that congregations can be help centers and the hospital can be a disease and surgical center so we’re working on that model and it's now going through the Duke bureaucracy which it may take a while. But they’re having meetings with the vice president of nursing and the director of pastoral services. So that's the health dimension. So social capital it's a lot of networking all over the place not only for financial support but for people. so we had a group to go to Watts Street my former church, Sunday; they have already signed up to call they had twenty people sign up to say that they’d be in interested in working as allies. We got a meeting this Friday with the James Scott Farrin Law Firm where we got a Latina attorney who's there who is a part of our coalition the Real Durham group and so she's working on getting her law firm. I went to talk on a panel at the CEO sleep out in downtown Durham so after that, one young man who's running a startup business with fifteen employees said “can you come and talk to my employees, I’d really like for us to be involved in this.” I think there are so many people who are looking for an opportunity where they can their business or their organization can be involved. To me it's just throwing the net as
wide as we can and networking and trying to get people involved. Does that help your questions?

SEILIG:

Absolutely, I guess trying to jump off the poverty training real quickly. Bill Finlator earlier and his stands on the Vietnam War and kind of going against community pushback in opposition of the Vietnam War. I would like to talk to you about your experience with operation Desert Storm and how that paralleled Mr. Finlator's experience, how you channeled his passions.

WILLIAMS:

Channeled is a good word, I learned a lot from Bill Finlator, and part of it is that without the ethical dimension of religion it can drift into sentimentality. 1991 was that war emerged it really did upset me and actually since you were going to ask that question, I went and read back the sermon that I had preached on the Sunday after that war had started. It was wrenching because I was saying there is no way that I can as a Christian support this war and I said it from my heart in the pulpit, I said I appose it and yet we certainly want to pray for soldiers and certainly be as supportive as we can. But the war I thought was wrong and why and I said ok our allegiance is to Jesus who was a nonviolent person so my conflict was how do you support this war which a lot of people were saying it's unjust, flesmy, and so it was very troubling to me. So I took my stand but then of course people in the congregation, I mean one woman had said to me "you know when you had criticized President Bush you had also criticized my whole family because my father was in the military, my uncle was in the military, my grandfather was in the military." And I said well I really appreciate that, but part of what I tried to do then, there were people that got upset I got letters from members of the congregation saying I was embarrassing them, and I was offending them and their family. And I said, well I would like to come visit again I learned this from Bill Coffin I said I want to understand you and I want you to understand me because I said to them our goal is not agreement, our goal is understanding. We need to understand each other. And so I sat down with a number of those families then and certainly even more in 2003 when the Iraq war started. More conversations, I don’t know we may have lost a few members back in that 1991 but not maybe I can recall maybe one family. So to me the important thing in a congregation is maintain relationships even when we did disagree. I mean, my
own brother votes republican, I don't vote republican heck we disagree on a lot of things but I love him and I tell him when we disagree. So the goal is not agreement, it's understanding. And I try to say that in the congregation and the same thing about the inclusion of gays and lesbians because one of my dear veteran members said to me one day 'you have crammed this war thing down our throats and you have crammed this homosexuality thing down our throats'. So well I really appreciate how you telling me how you feel about it but I disagree with you and I certainly hope we'll just keep talking it through. Well we did and got through all that, but I think people have to speak their minds, but I would be derelict as a leader, as a person who represents faith and conscience if I did not take stands that I believe are consistent with my faith.

KNEBEL:
00:38:06 This question will be tied to that; do you see many changes in American perspective, since 1964 civil rights act, toward the poor? Basically what I mean all your life work is to help us to change the perspective.

WILLIAMS:
00:38:33 The numbers are going in the wrong direction, I mean people would say will argue on the war on poverty was not successful. Certainly what happened in North Carolina was successful at the beginning because they did show some reduction in poverty, but the numbers have gone up, what is it now they say we have forty-six million people in poverty in this country. That's absurd to be the wealthiest country in the world; I mean one of my members gave me a subscription to the Wall Street Journal. Its baffling to me; this morning, the front page of it David Rubenstein is chair of Duke board of trustees and he runs the Carlisle group, this was an article about tycoons who had windfalls from last year and his windfall was two hundred and one million this past year. His chair is the trustee at Duke so I hope he gives Duke a chunk of that money, he probably will. But on the back-page on that front section of The Wall Street Journal was a Syrian refugee in Turkey sitting on a corner begging with his four year old son in his lap and so that's what I saw in the Wall Street Journal this morning. That on the one hand this extreme wealth and on the other hand we have people begging on the corner. That should not be. Surely that we are smart enough to do something about it. We are hearing more about income in equality, and we should, we had some folks at
Duke for example at the fiftieth anniversary of the admission of the first blacks who really wanted to see Duke University do more about poverty in Durham. Because you've got the capital campaign, is to two billion or three billion now? That Duke is working on well there is a real opportunity, what if they took a slice of that, one percent of that and said we are going to invest that in various anti poverty initiatives in Durham. That would be good news. Now I have worked with Duke and I think that's one of your questions, they have certainly been very supportive in Walltown and I have really appreciated the investment that Duke has made and I can tell you stories of going to talk to John Burness who was vice president of Duke here over at Walltown. And said “John, we need a health clinic in Walltown”. We talked about it and talked about, and one day he said “Mel, there will be no free standing health clinic in Walltown now, have you got it?” I said “Okay”. So I said at John's retirement it's always wonderful when John Barness tells you 'no'. Because after that he's going to go away and think about it and his conscience will bother him, there is now a health clinic in Walltown, it's on Broad Street. Because we kept lobbying and advocating even when he said there will not be one. But there is one now, so Duke, certainly at times when Duke has really risen to the occasion and that's a great example. And they were very supportive of the work in Walltown and Fayowin (?) now through the Duke Durham partnership has made significant strides in helping Duke. I think Duke could do a whole lot more and this whole thing about equity for Durham residents. That was one of the things that the African American students who first got admitted to Duke, said they got most of their support from people in Durham, from the churches of Durham who made them feel at home. And so they were saying to honor the legacy of their entering Duke wouldn’t this be a great opportunity for Duke to make another commitment to try to do something about inequities in Durham.

**KNEBEL:**
00:42:48 This is the type of work that also you have done being chair of the committee on Baptist studies at Duke University?

**WILLIAMS:**
00:42:58 Yes

**KNEBEL:**
How do you believe that Baptist studies succeeds to promote its mission and ideas?

WILLIAMS:

00:43:00 Good, Good. Well that’s an interesting story, when I first arrived in 1998 at Watts Street Baptist Church, the first phone call I got was from the Dean of Duke Divinity School. Who had been a classmate of mine at Yale divinity school. And he said can you come and talk to me about a possible Baptist house of studies. Well when we were in New Haven, this is Dennis Campbell, there were a number of houses of study I think there was a Presbyterian house of study, and I think there was a Disciples house. And so we had seen the model, at that time the fundamentalists were taking over South Eastern seminary and so where do moderate Baptist pastors get an education if at that point Duke divinity had maybe twenty- twenty five Baptists who were enrolled there. So because of my friendship with Dennis Campbell he said “would you be willing to chair a committee on Baptist studies.” So we began gathering some people and said can we admit more Baptists to Duke Divinity School which was primarily been a Methodist school. And at that time Dennis said “Well, I think maybe we can't take more than fifty.” Right now I think we have a hundred and ten Baptist students at Duke Divinity School through the Baptist house of studies. So we found a director and said okay if Duke would raise half that salary we’d find the other half and so that was. I appreciate the chance to work on that because in a sense the education that I got was in an ecumenical divinity school where I came to appreciate different traditions. and I thought that with Baptist coming to duke where you have Methodist and Presbyterian and Episcopalians, it’s a great opportunity for moderate Baptist students to get an excellent education and at the same time being exposed to different traditions and that we can learn from the different traditions. So I was glad to be apart of that during those I guess I chaired that committee for, I can’t put five years maybe six years to get it up and running. So I think now it's very much apart of the divinity school and the Baptist students there, what I am told are some of the best students in the divinity school. So that’s good news.

KNEBEL:

00:45:32 Sounds like it's been very serious work, and also not easy and probably energy draining I mean. What motivates you today
and in the past, where do you get the courage and the strength to do such community work for prevention of poverty?

WILLIAMS:

Thank you for the question. It's a very good question and I am very interested in that. Well I landed in a hospital twice, with a bleeding ulcer first in 1989, a heart arrhythmia in '93. So I knew I had to do something to moderate my pace so a friend of mine said there’s a monastery, trust me, go there. But the monastery happened to be in California. In 1995 with tears because I knew this was scary to me I am going to a monastery, here basically I have been extrovert, involved in the community. Here I go to a monastery which is more of an introvert but if you look at the union psychology they say well extravert, introvert, well if the first half of your life your an extravert then the second you need to integrate your introvert side. I’ve been going to that monastery now for nineteen consecutive years it’s been a life changing experience for me. To get up at five o’clock in the morning to go chant the songs with the monks, I asked them to let me live inside the wall the way they lived. And so it has been an amazing experience that has really fed my inner life, I have just been working on a possible article because I came back last year I came back after my week at the church. Its another thing at Watts Street Baptist Church supported me and actually paid my way there every year, so this has really been my where I find the spiritual energy to do the work. So this year I came back with four words and I told a friend of mine you know it cost me two thousand dollars to go out there and I came back with four words. He said “well that's five hundred dollars a word that's a pretty good deal, Mel.” So I have been writing about those four words and those four words are 'Wellspring’, got to get back to the ‘wellspring’, the inner and do the inner work, the inner wellspring. And Part of that involves removing the debris I say if you picture a spring that's flowing and there are leaves and rocks and 'glunk’ that gets in the way. Well you have got to release it so to me the first part of going to the wellspring is releasing whatever anxieties, frustrations, stresses, dilemmas and letting them go so that the wellspring can flow freely. The second word was ‘Gush’, as the monks keep saying “Mel, it will gush; if you just stay at the wellspring it will gush with goodness.” And so I have adopted that word 'Gush’. And it really is consistent with the story in John IV about the woman at the well; Jesus says “I will give you living water that will 'Gush' forth to eternal life.” So 'Gush'. And the third word is ‘Aliveness’
because I'm fascinated; I think that what Jesus was really about was helping people become alive. And if you go to the wellspring and allow this inner spring to gush then that is the source of our aliveness and our aliveness to me is more than a happy personality or a cheerleading personality. I think aliveness is something that's internal, it's an internal quality, and that aliveness is consistent with your core values. So when aliveness happens then it also awakens compassion and mercy and justice; those qualities that we need for our work in the world. So that Aliveness is the third word. The fourth word is 'Light' which I see as energy, that bright light shining is really energy and so we are given ‘Light’, that is the energy to do our work in the world. So that's the summary of what I got this year, but that’s been true year after year after year. But basically it's internal work and that if we don't do the internal work we can't do long term social justice work without an inner practice, some kind of practice. And whether you call it G-d or goodness or some other word; whatever your wellspring is to get back to it.

Because this work is very demanding, it's daunting, it's difficult and messy. And so to me going back to the monastery every year and then my daily practice of some silence or sitting by a candle is crucial for replenishing, rejuvenating for this work, which is long haul work.

SELIG:

Can you discuss how you have applied that or any other lessons you have learned in the monastery in California to your life in Durham or your missions in Durham?

WILLIAMS:

Well when I first came back I said going to Big Sur California, first of all it's a ruggedly, if you've ever been on that Hwy 1, it is rugged beauty. So I go out there and cry, I just cry a lot, which is very useful to me. It's 2 miles up overlooking the Pacific Ocean so it's just, and the Monks they say well if you’re going to spend your life in a monastery might as well be in a beautiful place. Well it is a spectacularly beautiful place, so I said ok we all can't go to California so I came back and said can we start a monastery here. So I went to visit a catholic sister, Sister Evelyn Matter and said “Evelyn, am I crazy? Can we start, there’s not a monastery, can we start one?” And she didn't laugh at me, she took me seriously. so there was a little monastery up near Oxford and were closing, I went up there and begged them not to close it, I looked foolish being a Baptist
begging these Catholics not to close their monastery, but they did it anyway. But sister Evelyn took me seriously and she said it has to grow out of community and it has to be interfaith so we started a group of people meeting monthly that became the 'circle of sacred silence’ we’d sit in silence for 20 minutes at a time, take a little break and it's a little more silence and then we'd had various 'peace hill days' we'd call them. And the groups still exist in fact I’ll go tomorrow morning, 8 o'clock. And we'll sit in silence it's a peace hill morning silence. So that's one way I've tried to apply what I learned in California and we've gathered a group of people here who first and third Mondays we sit in silence. And then out at Stone House, I don't know if ya'll have, you probably have interviewed Claudia Horowitz, have you? The director of Stone House, but anyways she's something, we've had 'Peace hill Days' out there. And now that I don't have a particular assignment on Sunday mornings, I have been going to sit with the Quakers so they sit in silence and they 'speak’ out of the silence. I have not spoken yet in a Quaker meeting because their principal is "Speak only if you can improve upon the silence". So that's daunting, but other people in that tradition you know when the spirit moves you, you speak. But also it's just wonderful silence, you've got seventy-five people sitting in a room and being silent. I think that's revolutionary. The Quaker's also have a great tradition of social activism, growing out of the silence. So to me the great interest of my life is how to put together contemplative life and social justice. It's prayer and social justice, how do we unite the two. And Sister Evelyn was a great balance to me of living the contemplative life and being involved in social activism. So that's really I guess it's become a theme a central thing, in terms of my own ministry; is how to balance those two but also how to help members of my congregation, and members of the community find their aliveness and their Light so that they can be involved with us in this poverty mission.

00:54:48  “Time Out”

...For different people, but I’m very interested in the replenishing process. And when you’re a student you have all these demands. What replenishes? Other than going out and drinking beer and cheering at the basketball game, what else replenishes you?

SELG:
00:55:07  That doesn’t replenish very well.
WILLIAMS:
Well it’s a temporary feel good.

SELG:
00:55:16 We’ve talked a lot about poverty, the causes behind it, kind of in a “meta-sense.” I’d like to hear your experience with poverty right now. What’s the geography of poverty? Where are the strongholds? And what does it look like on the ground to a parent, to a child? Just some hands on.

WILLIAMS:
00:55:40 Well, I’m probably not the best person to ask. I think you guys need to go to East Durham. Part of my deal with Bruce is to figure out the way for the resources of this center to be available. For example, we talked about giving cameras to kids and letting them take pictures of their life. I think I can give you the… It’s disturbing to me to think that they’re 63% of children in census track 10.01 living below the poverty level. Now, this is East Durham and now we are seeing an infusion of services. That’s where East Durham Children’s Initiative is located. Healthy Families Durham. We’re focusing this REAL Durham initiative there. The business community also needs to help revitalize the economic sectors around there. This place called Joe’s Diner, this is an area that had been in great decline. In other words, the stabilizing businesses. Cameron and Ernie Smith are, Cameron we’ve employed in REAL Durham. They work in asset-based community development. Part of what they’re after is to go into a neighborhood and say “rather than looking at the deficiencies, which is easy to do, let’s look at the assets. What’s here? The institution, the churches, the indigenous leaders” So part of what they’re helping us do, they’re having potluck suppers and meeting with neighbors. I’m not immediately involved there. I want to be. This past year I was part of a circle of support. I was the only Baptist along with

00:56:45 6 Presbyterian ministers. (Indiscernible) calls them “puppy Presbyterian pastors.” They’re all 30 years old and here I am 70. We worked with a single mom with a 5 year-old child. She had been homeless and we were really trying to help her. The first part, she got her own apartment. But how do you make it on $7.25 an hour at Bojangles? That was her earnings. And they made sure her hours stayed under 30 hours. So see she’s not going to have any benefits. You put the pencil to it, how are you going to make it and pay rent, groceries, etc.? The child had
special needs. He was a hyperactive child. We tried to say, okay, we had very bright; the Presbyterian minister at Duke was the leader of the team, to connect her with services. She did not have a GED, so to get a better paying job she needed a GED. We said, okay, we want to encourage you as much as possible so I’m going to go to Durham Tech. She didn’t do it, and she didn’t do it. I remember sitting one day and saying “If I could give you a give, I want to give you gumption and grit.” How do you give gumption and grit to another person to motivate them? So I said gumption and grit, GED. We can make cheer out of it. “Gumption, Grit, GED.” Well, She still hasn’t gotten her GED. I think part of the messiness of this work is that we had to conclude, she’s not quite ready. Now maybe, I think she appreciated all of us. We’ve appreciated her. That was a one year commitment. It ended several months ago. It’s very difficult because you get attached to people. The little six-year-old would come “Mr. Mel! Mr. Mel!” and he would hug me. Great little kid. So did we succeed? Most of us would probably say no. Now will we maintain, certainly some of us will maintain relationship with her. Will another year pass and she be ready? Part of what we are after, that’s a program that really focuses on homeless population. The REAL Durham Initiative is focused on the next level, the working poor. They probably have a place to live, but they’re barely making it. So we’re looking for people who have motivation. We’ve said okay, on the poverty-passion scale, can we find people who are the 8-9-10 in the poverty-passion scale to get out of poverty. Our partner in that experience that I just described was not there yet. Was she a 4? And then the other thing is how do we find allies, people like you guys, who say “I’m going to make an 18-month commitment to attend a weekly meeting and invest in this family.” We are looking for allies, middle class people like us, who are at an 8-9 or 10 on the poverty-passion scale. Those are the kind of people we are trying to find. We have to make choices, particular program is really a national program. It’s based on five outcomes: increased income, increased assets, decreased debt, decreased reliance on public assistance, and 4 people you can count on. We know it’s data driven. In North Carolina, those who have completed this program, 18 months, show a 30% increase in income. I say our goal in Durham, with all the people we work with, is going to be that 30% or more. 35% of the people in Durham live in asset poverty. That is, they have no savings account, they have no car, they have no house. 35%! Durham, when the average income in Durham is over $50,000 and yet we
have 35% of people living in asset poverty. The REAL Durham initiative nationally shows that people who complete the program, end up showing 80% increase in assets. They start up a savings account, they may get a car. Those are the types of things we are after but it’s messy, it’s complex, it’s one step forward and two steps back. Just like the description that I gave you, I wish I could report that we worked a miracle. Mel and the puppy Presbyterian pastors, but we didn’t. Now, who knows what influence down the road that will have? Or what an ongoing relationship might, because our partner texted u all the time. People may be in poverty but they know how to use the gadgets.

KNEBEL:

When are looking back on your career as a faithful, religious person, what have you found as a specific project that you feel very close to? I know you had many projects that you were successful, but is there one that you would like to put the magnifying glass under more?

WILLIAMS:

Thank you for the question. If I focused only on my congregation I would certainly say the whole process that resulted in a policy of inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians. We first started discussions in 1992, I think. 2008/9, we finally... We took a vote in 2001 and got nowhere. I was very discouraged. It ended up being a third, a third, a third. It didn’t work. I was very discouraged at that point because I’ve always long thought that the church has many failures and that’s been one of them.

SELIG:

When you say “a third, a third, a third,” just to clarify, is that a third in favor, a third against, and a third indifferent?

WILLIAMS:

Yeah, we didn’t have a majority vote. It just ended up being nowhere. That’s when after that, a year or so later, the guy I mentioned to you about the film, the “Just As I Am” film, which was really...love you to see it sometime Bruce, because it would be interesting for the filmmaking for social change within a little congregation of 500 people. That would be the accomplishment because it took so long, and it’s one of those things that I had some of my members, probably 25 ordained ministers that are members of Watts Street. Way back in ’92,3,4 when I first said we really need a policy, they came
and talked to me. They said, “you’re going too fast, this congregation isn’t ready.” That was very frustrating to me, and I almost quit in 2001 over that again. Again, my example of my minister growing up who resigned and said “if this congregation can’t make the decision to include these people who we had gotten to know, wonderful people, than can I stay here?” One friend said, “Many congregations have not even taken the first step, so think about it long term. This is taking an important step.” So finally, when we got there, that was certainly to be celebrated. I officiated a ceremony for Bob and Gordon who had been together for forty years. We had a ceremony in the church attended by 400 people and at the end of the ceremony the congregation spontaneously stood and applauded. Now that was a great moment. That was a long process, almost 20 years of conversations made that possible. If I pointed to another thing it would be the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham and the work of Marsha Owen. She’s been an incredible human being and we have learned so much from her. If there is anyone close to Mother Theresa it’s probably Marsha Owen because she has the capacity, talking about moving across barriers, of saying to people, regardless of their socioeconomic status, of being in prison or have they gotten in trouble, she would say “there is no escaping my love.” She’s told all of us that. Anyone she meets. “There is no escaping my love.” The Religious Coalition has been a remarkable experience. The poverty work is still unfolding, so we will see. I guess if I had to point to those two events of the last 24 years, it would be the inclusion of gays and lesbians and the work with the Religious Coalition.

SELIG:

When did you first begin working with Marsha Owens?

WILLIAMS:

1992. Les Dunbar found her; he went to speak to a neighborhood group and she was there. We were looking for someone to help us and there she was. Sometimes you find the right person. She was exactly the right person, because she has been passionate and committed. She is head of an annual fundraiser at Judeo Reform Synagogue, we’ll do that in April. There’ll be 200 people there. She has built an enormous goodwill in the community. Support from Duke Chapel, support from the Quakers, support from Watts Baptist, across the faith traditions.
You touched upon it but I wanted to bring it up again. People’s prejudice reinforcing ignorance in poverty. What can we do to avoid it?

WILLIAMS:
That’s a good question. I think we’ve been seeing a punitive attitude toward the poor. You see it in the legislature, you see it in Congress. It’s cruel, as if people are responsible, they’ve caused their poverty. How can you say to a child in poverty it’s your fault? It’s not the fault of the doing of the child; it’s the fault of the system that does not provide opportunities and resources that are needed. I think we do have to combat the prejudice. Wilt Campbell said after the 1960’s, “White people have forgiven people from being black but we haven’t forgiven people from being poor. That we somehow see it as being a character flaw.” And that’s wrong. I think it requires an attitude shift. Bruce, that’s why I am interested in your course. How do we help people move beyond a negative view of the poor, the stereotype: lazy, don’t want to work. That stereotype which is still out there. We have work to do to change that. I am hoping that in terms of race or gay and lesbians, once you know someone in your family or you know someone as a friend, it’s a no-brainer. Do we know someone who’s really poor? Most of the time we really don’t because we live in our isolated areas. If we could cross the barrier and know people who may be different from us and get to know them as friends. The prejudice comes from ignorance, lack of experience and lack of relationship. When I went to talk to Sam Wells at the Duke Chapel about poverty he said, “I think that the definition of poverty is the lack of trusting relationships.” Now it’s not only that, but that was his view. We are back to the relationship question, that once we know someone their race, economic class, or sexual orientation doesn’t matter because my kids are in their twenties, and the whole question regarding gays and lesbians, they say, “Dad, come on, it’s a no-brainer.” Isn’t that true of your compatriots? I mean, get over it.

SELIG:

You mentioned how the decisions, whether at the state or federal level, can influence poverty on the ground. Can you talk about the effects you saw from the local government’s decision to put 147 going through the Hayti neighborhood?

WILLIAMS:
I guess you heard about that growing up. Did that happen when you were a child?

SELG:
It was before that.

WILLIAMS:

1:13:00 Yeah, I still hear ripples about that. The business people, because I had some of them in my congregation, said that road had to happen, because we needed it for business reasons and to connect to Duke, it had to be done. On the other hand, it did wipe out a historic African American community. Some people are still pained about that. Also, that was during the 1960s a lot of urban renewal, we needed to wipe out blithe in the areas. One of the things that has come out of that, I’ve certainly been to a lot of meetings at the Hayti cultural center which is still there, so atleast that has been preserved. But, we’ve been asking all of our leaders of the REAL Durham initiative to take the racial equity training. I went and took that two-day workshop a month ago. When you look at the system and how it has been systematically structured against people of color, you begin to understand that the poverty we see has been systemic poverty. It has been the result of policies that have been forced white privilege. I guess that 147 was probably initiated by white privileged, and businesses that were probably run by whites. Durham is fortunate that it has the North Carolina Mutual Mechanics and Farmers Bank that are African American businesses, they’re successful businesses. There was a time that Durham, in the 40’s and 50’s, was known as the Black Wall Street. You had that strong middle-class leadership in Durham, so the issue still remains we relate with decency and respect across racial lines because of this terrible history. In the racial equity workshop, there was this woman, 18 or 19 year-old at NC State, that said to one of the African American leaders of the workshop, “what can I do to earn your trust.” And the response from the leader was, “You cannot earn my trust.” She said, “I think we might be able to be friends, we might even love each other, but trust, I don’t think so.” I turned to the young woman, who was Teach for America in the workshop with me, and I said, “I want to follow-up. Do you think you and I could trust each other?” She said, “only if I think you really understand all this material we’ve heard in these two days. Maybe if I think you’ve understand all of that we can trust each other.” Now that’s pretty eye-opening stuff. I would like to, in my naïve view, that
we can trust each other easily. But with the history of abuse, injustice to African Americans, we still have a long way to go. I think this poverty work will be another piece of that work to say, “over the long haul, can we build relationships that there will be some trust?”

SELIG:
1:17:06 What type of material were they discussing at this workshop?

WILLIAMS: Actually just going through the history from back at the 40 acres and a mule that wee promised when they were freed, that of course was never done, and then policies. They just filled you with all the historical stuff that has favored white supremacy through the years. Some of the stuff that was not taught to most of us in our history classes. Maybe you got some of it, who’s the guy who said we need to do it from the ground up, rather than the white view. Certainly, I got very little of the information that was presented there growing up, because it gets written by white people from white privilege.

KNEBEL: 1:18:10 I think you are very lucky being able to go to California and reenergize yourself. It sounds like you have a creative mind, coming up with the ideas how to help tackle this serious subject of poverty. According to the times, you sort of tailor your new values and ideas according to the times that you are in. Can you give us an example of some more ideas that you had how to bring about more accepting poverty. I read something about the heart, being, and love, and another word.

WILLIAMS: 1:19:05 Yes, I was in Quaker meeting last Sunday and Scott Holmes stood up and said, “I am going to speak next week at the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham.” They have monthly meetings and he was invited to come. He is a Quaker attorney. He represents any Panhandlers, he represents a number of folks who were arrested in the Moral Monday demonstrations in Raleigh. He said, “I’ve been asked to talk about a vision that would help us overcome violence, poverty, and racism in Durham.” He said, “Of course we know the answer is love, but what are some specific steps that will help us actualize love?” His whole speech, I was there. We have a sister church in El Salvador, and the minister, Miguel Castro, was here. I went
down there in 2007 and we signed a covenant with Emanuel Baptist Church in San Salvador, so Miguel was here so I took him with me to that meeting last Thursday. He talked a lot about restorative justice because, what is basically practiced is punitive justice. Particularly talking about the focus on drugs and saying that for any nonviolent offence, don’t put people in jail or you’re bringing down the hammer. Or school suspensions: stop kicking people out of school. What are there, 800 suspensions every year in Durham public schools? And now we have a 15-24 age group, there are 6000 young people who are not working or not in school. One of the things Scott said is stop kicking people out of school, because it doesn’t work. It merely feeds these social difficulties. How do you actualize love? Because that really is what it’s about when you get down to it, and being able to overcome, reach beyond our differences, and to see our commonality regardless of our education rates, class, sexual orientation. So that’s really the issue: how do we learn to accept and respect each other’s humanity? I think, obviously, one of the things that’s happening with gun violence is, what happened to the sacredness of human life that we have somehow failed to impart that? The sign outside of the Quaker meeting quotes George Fox, 1656, that says, “Walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every person.” “Answering that of God.” The Quakers believe that’s the inner light in every person. One of the things that happens at the Monastery that I just love is that they bow to each other all the time. When I first when out there I said, “What is all this bowing about?” People know that when I would come back from the Monastery to my congregation and I see people I would be bowing and bowing. Well, we bow to respect the sacred in every person. And we bow to respect the sacred in the Eucharist at the alter. I think we should all go around bowing to each other. What is it, Namaste, which I reverence the sacred that is in you. Maybe we need that kind of bowing. Ritual actually works, and we have to embody it. So the bowing really, after awhile, if you act long enough then it becomes your attitude of respect, for the reverence of each person. You can’t kill somebody that you reverence and respect. Maybe we need to get people bowing. Does that get at your question?

KNEBEL:

1:24:00 Maybe some more words?

WILLIAMS:
More words? What words would you like me to add?

KNEBEL:
You said something about...

WILLIAMS:
Oh, yes, okay! That was the year before. The four words, and I guess you read the article in Faith and Leadership, because I wrote some reflections from the Monastery last year. Those four words I came back with were: trust, abundance, being, and heart. Those were the four words. Again, I’m trying to communicate across, whether you’re religion or no religion, that trust is the basic attitude rather than fear. Can we trust one another? Abundance is seeing that we have everything that we need, and I really believe this, I’ve said it in my stump speech about poverty; we have everything we need to end poverty in Durham, we just haven’t found the will to do it. Abundance is there so if you are going to see an asset-based community development, the abundance is there rather than looking at the deficit. Look at the abundance. Being rather than doing. When you talk about activism, you’re talking about a lot of doing, but I really think you can’t keep doing unless you learn being. Evelyn Underhill said, “we spend our lives conjugating three verbs: to have, to want, to do. But the essential verb is to be.” Of course, that is the spiritual question, but how do we cultivate our being? Because without cultivating our being, our doing will run out of gas. So how to get back to being? To me, when we’re bombarded and worrying about the technology that we spend so much time in front of our computer, in front of our gadget, and I’m sure you see it at Duke. Everyone walking around looking at some gadget. When do we put those down and just say okay, who’s at home here? Bill Coffin said when he went on sabbaticals, “I went on sabbatical to pay a visit on myself, I wanted to see who’s at home.” That’s what happens for me at the Monastery, I want to pay a visit on myself and see who is this being who lives in here. So to get in touch with being. Psalm 46 says to be still and know that I’m God, but traced it back to be still and know, but then be. Just be. Someone said that being and goodness are one in the same thing. So if we get back to being, then maybe we have a chance of discovering the goodness, the true self that is in all of us. Heart, that word, we spend a lot of time in our minds. But the journey from the head to the heart is the journey of 1000 miles. What I’ve appreciated about the Monastery is that when I go there it tends to open my
heart. I don’t know if it is being freed of my responsibilities or the beauty of the place, and being able to get back in touch with what is important. It connects to my heart. In fact, in most meditation practice, they’re saying stop thinking. The monkey mind. One motto that I’m reminding myself is “don’t think, look. Don’t think, look.” Because with my backpacking buddies, been going on winter backpacking trips for 30 years, we went down to a cabin on the Pamlico River. When it snowed, that first time, what was that two weeks ago? Here, all of us guys, my age, two of them are doctors, two of us are pastors, and we go to be outrageous together. Outrageocity, that’s another way I think I rejuvenate. Just have some place where you can take off the layers of your persona and be ridiculous for awhile. I guess that’s what happens when you’re in college. What happened there, it was snowing and there are birdfeeders out there, and here are five guys just standing here looking at birds. We had our binoculars and I said, “Guys look at this, we’re all just looking at these birds. What’s going on here?” I thought it was wonderful though. Don’t think, look. We got in a big discussion about redwing blackbirds. I said I saw some redwing blackbirds on my birdfeeder. And another guys said, “Mel, they don’t come to birdfeeders.” He’s sort of an expert on birds, I’m not. We saw some redwing blackbirds, there was a whole flock of them, or as I said a congregation of redwing blackbirds there... a flock. After a while he said they don’t come to birdfeeders. Some of us went out for a walk and he stayed there and said, “Mel, I hate to admit it, but there was a redwing blackbird on the birdfeeder.” Don’t think, look. Look. Heart, connect to the heart.

SELIG:

I’d like to ask, how has your view on poverty changed since coming to Durham, if it has at all? And, really what you yourself learned from the conditions in Durham, and you’re work in Durham.

WILLIAMS:

It is worse than I thought. We had to face some of our child poverty. 14,000 children in poverty, we’ve got to change it. I figure if we focus on the children, then we have more of a chance to reaching people’s hearts. What I have wondered, and I’ve said this here and there, is can we cut the child poverty rate in half in the next 10 years? When we first started End Poverty Durham, we said we wanted to eliminate poverty in Durham in 25 years. That was 10 years ago. We didn’t say which 25 years,
we just said in 25 years. I’m 70 now so I don’t know how long, in another 10 years will I see the child poverty rate at 12% or 15%?

KNEBEL:
1:31:38 How long has it been at 27%?

WILLIAMS:
It is that based on the 2010 census. We will have to see because we say we want to help children lift out of poverty by helping their parents get better jobs and other opportunities. We still focus the lens on the children but, as somebody said, children are poor because parents are poor in neighborhoods are poor. All of it has to change. As I said to the mayor, and I’m so grateful that he’s focusing, and that he wants to have community meetings bringing people together, resources, but I said okay, somebody told me there’s a service station across from Los Primos on Angier Avenue. I go to the Y every morning, and this is Reverend Willy Jones, who’s pastor of Refiners’ Fire Church, wonderful man. He said, “I’d love to get that service station and turn it into a place where we give people jobs.” So I said that to the mayor, because I asked him that morning in the locker room at the Y, I said what do you think I should tell the mayor, he said, “help us get that service station.” That’s just one example. If we got that service station and turned it into some kind of center that would give people jobs and would help stabilize the neighborhood. Those kinds of things give me encouragement. I got an email from the director of the Durham YMCA because I met him, he’s new. I said okay, the Y is an important institution and I know you want to help people. They have a program called “We Build People,” it raises money so that low-income kids can be a part of their program. I hear you may consider putting a Y in East Durham. There’s a Holton Resource Center there, in the middle of East Durham. Durham Parks and Recreation have offices there but they have the capacity to turn it into a Y. I said, “I would like to talk with you more about that. If we are going to talk about the health of this low income neighborhood we need an emphasis on exercise, because obesity is also a problem.” Again, if we can keep talking and say “Okay, let’s out a Y in East Durham.” You asked me about changes in poverty. I get encouraged when I hear about possibilities like that, and if we can just keep plowing the ground, keep encouraging people. I had a call from one businessman who said, “Mel, I just read your article about poverty and I’ve been thinking about what I can
do.” He said, “I’ve got a piece of poverty, it’s over there at Durham Tech on the corner of Lawson and Bacon Street. I wonder if we could make that into a children’s community garden.” I said I don’t know anything about community gardens but now that I have a little time, I said I’m going to research. I called the president of Durham Tech, I called the SEEDS people who do community gardens, bountiful backyards, I called the extension agent at NC State. It hasn’t happened yet, but I was encouraged by that. Here’s a successful businessman, a piece of land, it’s four acres, it would make a great community garden. I guess he doesn’t plan to build anything on it. It may yet happen, but again the human factor you say, “Well I really think the fire department maybe should take on that project.” A community garden folks is not simple. You have to have a fence, irrigation. We are probably going to need 10 or $15,000 to get that going.

1:36:00 You need someone to manage it, to help kids in the neighborhood learn how to do some gardening, so it’s a great project. But the fact he called, that’s encouraging. You keep hearing things like this and people begin to think “How can I be part of the solution?” That’s encouraging.

KNEBEL:

1:36:21 You are obviously very creative in terms of creating ideas, but how do you bring it to the public? You talk about it in the congregation, but for most of us who don’t have a leadership role, how do you advise people to bring the awareness that they can do something?

WILLIAMS:

1:37:00 As I say whenever I get invited to give my stump speech, or my stump sermon, I say we need all of us. You may be thinking of ideas that we haven’t thought of. That community garden idea, or that CEO who is out the sleep-outs saying he wants the 15 people in his company to be involved in this initiative, that he will even give release time for them to be involved. Or can they develop the data system? There were actually some Duke students who heard about our work, a sophomore who’s name is Jiu Chou, was telling me about something, you all could find out about this, some computer project

KNEBEL:
Bank Benefit?

WILLIAMS:
1:38:00 Benefit Bank? No. He said you bring in 300 students and you give them an idea, how can they use technology to do something about poverty? Do y’all know about that? He was a sophomore at Duke.

KNEBEL:
There is a project that Duke is doing about building up business and people bring their own ideas. Everybody’s coming together if you are an engineer and you have an idea, you come together. I forget the name of it.

WILLIAMS:
1:38:30 Yes, maybe that is what it is. I find that very encouraging. People are beginning to think, “the skills that I have, or resources that I have, what is it that I can do that might make a difference?” To me, I go around seeing people. At our congregation we ask 3 questions about any mission: #1 Is this good news, alleviating poverty in Durham? #2 Does it seem impossible to accomplish? #3 Is there a good chance we will fail? If you can answer yes to all 3 questions, that is a sign that you are to undertake the mission. Is this good news, alleviating poverty in Durham? Does it seem impossible to accomplish? Is there a good chance we will fail? If you can answer yes to all 3 it’s a sign that the spirit is leading you to do it. So if everybody asked that question, what is the good that I might do, does it seem impossible, and might I fail? We all must make an effort, somehow make an effort, or as I’ve said to my people for years at church, “Pick up the near edge. What is the near edge for you? And act it some sacrifice to yourself.” So what is the near edge in the poverty piece. For some people it may be going down to Urban Ministries and cooking a meal. We have some school classes that have done that, I’m sure you Duke students volunteer, go down to Big Brother/Big Sister projects. You pick a particular. Dan Kinberg is a wonderful graduate of Duke who started StudentU because he, we haven’t been together in a couple of weeks, because he’s finding a way to get parents engaged with their children. Again, low-income parents. Dan Kinberg went through the Duke system and is doing a terrific, terrific job with deduction and getting Duke students involved with the kids. There is room for everybody to have a piece of this and one of the nice things about the End Poverty Durham group is that we have 20-30 people sitting at the table who are in different agencies, and it gives us a chance to talk, to collaborate. Quinn Holmquist is a sophomore at Duke, he comes
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to End Poverty Durham and he works for the group called Community Empowerment Fund. He is very involved in the Community Empowerment Fund. It rose from a combination of Duke and UNC students working with low-income people. I find that very, very encouraging, that here is Quinn and other Duke students involved in the initiative. To me, to encourage all of those initiatives and more, that’s got to be good news down the road.

WILLIAMS:
1:41:56 Is there something that you haven’t asked that we should talk about?

SELIBG:
Or maybe the direction you see Durham going?

WILLIAMS:
1:42:10 There are a number of crazy ideas. One is, you know I am still fascinated about the novelist, the artists, the filmmakers. That still intrigues me back to John Ehle, the novelist from 1962. I just have a curiosity about that because I like finding creative people. Peggy Payne is a novelist, and I’ve floated this idea to her and she has a blog and a network so she sent it out to all of her writing friends and they sent in a bunch of ideas. I have a page full of those from her. But she says, “I haven’t found the next Charles Dickens or Charlotte Dickens.” But I’m still curious about that. The other thing I’m curious about is how philanthropy works. That’s something I need to learn more about. I’ve wondered if we got foundations together, and I’ve asked this question, is there some association of foundations? Even if you said that foundations or family funds or the Triangle Community foundation, in this area, if they all came together and said “we want to join the Mayor and End Poverty Durham and all the other groups working on poverty, and saying let’s bring together all our resources and set some goals.” What difference would that make? I know you can’t just throw money. Money, that’s not the solution because it is going to take people too. But resources, people as well as financial sources, that’s something I’ve certainly wondered about. I’ve gone to talk to George Reid, who’s the Executive Director of the North Carolina Council of Churches. I said, “George, what if you got all the, they call them judicatory heads, the leaders of all major faith traditions in the state, and said ‘Poverty is unacceptable, poverty is an affront to God and to human dignity. We are going to put in
all of our resources and for the next five or ten years, our major mission will be to eliminate poverty in this state.’’ I said “Can you do that?” He says, “Mel, I’d have to find a grant to get some money to work on that, and I don’t have that yet.” Anyways, those are some of the things I’ve wondered about. How do we encourage this to grow into a movement, where people of goodwill will get behind it, not only for Durham but for in the state too. In other words, can we produce a North Carolina Fund 2.0, a revised North Carolina Fund? A revived North Carolina Fund.

SELIG:
Thank you for your time.

WILLIAMS:
Thank you.