

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Bishop Vashti McKenzie

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	McKenzie, Vashti M., 1947-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie,
Dates:	March 14, 2007 and March 17, 2017
Bulk Dates:	2007 and 2017
Physical Description:	12 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files (5:49:03).
Abstract:	Bishop Bishop Vashti McKenzie (1947 -) became the first woman to become a titular head of the A.M.E. Church; she presided as prelate of the 13th Episcopal District in Tennessee and Kentucky. McKenzie was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 14, 2007 and March 17, 2017, in Dallas, Texas and Nashville, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_088
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie was born on May 28, 1947, in Baltimore, Maryland, to Ida Murphy Smith Peters and Samuel Edward Smith. McKenzie attended Robert Brown Elliot School, School #18, and Garrison Junior High School. She was also one of the six black students who attended Eastern High School. She graduated from Eastern High School in 1965. After spending a summer at the Blair School of Journalism, McKenzie enrolled at Morgan State University where she majored in history. She went on to attend the University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland, where she earned her B.A. degree. McKenzie went on to earn her MDiv degree in divinity from Howard University Divinity School in 1985.

After graduation, McKenzie began working for her family newspaper and wrote her own column, "The McKenzie Report." McKenzie joined Bethel A.M.E. Church, her family's original church, in 1976. In 1978, Cathy Hughes and Dewey Hughes contacted McKenzie about a position at WYCB Radio, and she began working there. McKenzie hosted an afternoon drive Gospel show on WYBC Radio in 1981, and later rose to the position of program director. McKenzie also worked for WJZ-TV doing a segment on a program called *Evening Magazine*. McKenzie rotated between working at WYCB, WEBB, and WAYE as an on-air personality, program director, general manager, and as Corporate Vice President of Programming of Mortenson Broadcasting Company. McKenzie was made an itinerant deacon in 1981 and commuted between Bethel A.M.E. in Cecil County and Ebenezer A.M.E. churches. McKenzie was ordained by the A.M.E. Church in 1984. In 1990, McKenzie joined Payne Memorial A.M.E. in Baltimore as pastor. In 2000, while serving as chief pastor of the 18th Episcopal District in southeast Africa, McKenzie was elected and consecrated as the 117th bishop of the A.M.E. Church at their General Council. McKenzie and Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry were the first women to become A.M.E. bishops. In 2005, McKenzie again made history as the first woman to become titular head of the A.M.E. Church. She subsequently became presiding prelate of the 13th Episcopal District in Tennessee and Kentucky.

McKenzie was the National Chaplain for Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and a lifetime member of the NAACP.

McKenzie received honorary doctorates from Howard University, Wilberforce University, Central State University in Ohio, Morgan State University, and Goucher College. In 1997, a poll of national leaders selected McKenzie for *Ebony* magazine's "Honor Roll of Great African American Preachers." McKenzie has authored four books: *Not Without a Struggle*, *Strength in the Struggle: Leadership Development for Women*, *A Journey to the Well* and *Swapping Housewives*.

McKenzie and her husband, Stan McKenzie, live in Dallas, Texas. They have three children: Jon-Mikael, Jasmine, and Jo-Marie.

McKenzie was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 14, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 14, 2007 and March 17, 2017, in Dallas, Texas and Nashville, Tennessee, and was recorded on 12 Betacame SP videocassettes uncompressed MOV digital video files. Bishop Bishop Vashti McKenzie (1947 -) became the first woman to become a titular head of the A.M.E. Church; she presided as prelate of the 13th Episcopal District in Tennessee and Kentucky.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

McKenzie, Vashti M., 1947-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
McKenzie, Vashti M., 1947---Interviews

African American women clergy--Interviews.

African American Episcopalians--Interviews.

African American bishops--Interviews.

Women bishops--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

African Methodist Episcopal Church

Occupations:

Bishop

HistoryMakers® Category:

ReligionMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, March 14, 2007 and March 17, 2017. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_001_001, TRT: 0:30:30 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie was born on May 28, 1947 in Baltimore, Maryland to Ida Murphy Peters and Samuel Edward Smith. Her maternal ancestors included Isaac Burns Murphy, a jockey in the Kentucky Derby; Sergeant Murphy, a veteran of the Civil War; and McKenzie's great-grandfather, John H. Murphy, Sr., who founded the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper in 1892. He had ten children, all of whom worked on the publication, including McKenzie's maternal grandfather Carl Jr. Murphy. While teaching German at Washington, D.C.'s Howard University, McKenzie's grandfather met and married Vashti Turley Murphy, who helped to found the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority in 1913. They bequeathed the newspaper to their five daughters, including McKenzie's mother, who studied journalism at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. McKenzie's parents met there, and married shortly afterwards. Upon graduating, they returned to Baltimore, where they raised McKenzie and her brother near Pennsylvania Avenue, the city's black business district.

African American women clergy--Interviews.

African American Episcopalians--Interviews.

African American bishops--Interviews.

Women bishops--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_001_002, TRT: 0:29:28 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, where she sang in the choir at the St. James Episcopal Church. She was a student at Public School No. 104 until the sixth grade, when the city's schools were desegregated. From that time, McKenzie was bused to Public School No. 18. The formerly all-white school had excellent facilities, including a gymnasium and a music room; but the teachers were less invested in McKenzie's success. While enrolled at Baltimore's Eastern High School, McKenzie was denied a role in the school play because of her race, and was rejected from the newspaper staff despite her experience working for the Baltimore Afro-American. She ignored her guidance counselor's suggestion that she learn a trade, and aspired to study history at Morgan College under Benjamin A. Quarles. Because of her family's prominence, McKenzie met influential African Americans like NAACP attorney

Thurgood Marshall and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She attended the March on Washington with her parents.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_001_003, TRT: 0:29:13 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie attended a summer program at the Blair School of Journalism in New Jersey after her graduation from Eastern High School. From 1965, she studied journalism and history at Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland. She hoped to learn African American history from Professor Benjamin A. Quarles, but he was on sabbatical leave during her enrollment. McKenzie married basketball player Stan McKenzie in 1968; and, after he was drafted to the Phoenix Suns, moved with him to Phoenix, Arizona. There, she joined the staff of the Arizona Republic, where she was the second woman employed at the news desk. She excelled, but left the publication in favor of a modeling career with a more flexible schedule. McKenzie lived in Portland, Oregon and Houston, Texas for her husband's professional basketball career; and, when he retired in 1974, returned to Baltimore. She wrote for the Baltimore Afro-American, and later became the media director of Lee Guber and Shelley Gross' Shady Grove Music Fair.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_001_004, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie's commitment to Christianity weakened in the 1960s, during her college years; but improved while she was living in Phoenix, Arizona. After returning to Baltimore, Maryland, she joined the Bethel A.M.E. Church, and transferred her credits from Morgan College to the University of Maryland. Upon graduating in 1976, she began a master's degree in human development. McKenzie's interest in journalism led her to become a radio host at WYCB Radio, a Christian radio station in Washington, D.C. She was promoted to program director and operations manager, and began using the platform to share her religious ideas. She also organized a small ministry to help the city's needy population. In 1981, McKenzie accepted a position at WEBB Radio, a gospel station; and, soon afterwards, was called to the clergy. She enrolled at the Howard University School of Divinity, where she studied under with theologians Cain Hope Felder and Delores Causion Carpenter.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_001_005, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie attended seminary at the Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C., where her instructors included Cain Hope Felder and Delores Carpenter. At the school, McKenzie was challenged in her religious beliefs, and developed her critical thinking skills. In 1982, she began pastoring a two-church circuit in Chesapeake City, Maryland. During this time, she continued her seminary coursework, and commuted from Baltimore, Maryland, where she lived with her husband, Stan McKenzie, and their two young children. McKenzie made significant changes at the churches in Chesapeake City, including renovations of the Bethel A.M.E. Church and a fundraising revival at the Ebenezer A.M.E. Church. At the time that McKenzie began preaching, there were few women in the ministry, and they often faced gender-based discrimination. She describes the flaws in scriptural interpretations that justified women's exclusion from the pulpit, and shares examples of female religious leaders from the Bible.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_001_006, TRT: 0:29:24 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie was assigned in 1984 as the pastor of the Oak Street

A.M.E. Church in Baltimore, Maryland. Over six years, she increased the small congregation of 88 individuals to over 300 members. McKenzie was then assigned to Baltimore's Payne Memorial A.M.E. Church. Despite the congregants' initial reservations about McKenzie's gender, she led the church successfully for eleven years. She grew the congregation from 85 people to over 1700 members; and developed 25 new ministries, including a youth summer program and an after-school tutoring program with Morgan State University students. The church also established a food pantry, and helped community members who received eviction notices. In the mid-1990s, the church purchased two buildings to house the ministries' events and programs; and, with funding from a federal initiative to employ welfare recipients, created GED training and professional attire programs. The church succeeded in obtaining work placements for over 600 people in two years.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_001_007, TRT: 0:29:51 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie served as the pastor of the Payne Memorial A.M.E. Church until 2000. During her tenure, she developed the church's relationship with the surrounding community in West Baltimore, Maryland. In addition, she pursued a doctorate of ministry at the United Theological Seminary; and, in 1996, published her dissertation as a book titled 'Not Without A Struggle: African American Women in Ministry.' McKenzie was called to the episcopacy the same year, and announced her candidacy for bishop. In 1996, she began a four-year campaign for the African Methodist Episcopal church's election in 2000. She distributed leaflets during the first two years, and developed marketing strategies for the annual church conferences. In the early years of her campaign, some church members expressed doubts about the possibility of a woman bishop; but, in 2000, McKenzie won the election. At that time, she was assigned to southeast Africa's episcopal district, which included Botswana, Swaziland, Mozambique and Lesotho.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_001_008, TRT: 0:30:57 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie was assigned to the Eighteenth Episcopal District upon her election as a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2000. The district included the countries of Swaziland, Lesotho, Mozambique and Botswana in southeast Africa. McKenzie was the first female bishop assigned to the district; where, due to the patriarchal culture, female congregants worshiped separately from the men and often sat on the floor during ceremonies. However, McKenzie was treated equally to the men because of her status as a religious leader. During her tenure, McKenzie focused on improving the schools affiliated with the district's churches, such as the Hillside A.M.E. High School in Mbabane, Swaziland; and worked to build computer labs to help youth and women develop employment skills. She also focused on assisting the victims of HIV/AIDS, which was widespread in the region; and eventually established three orphanages for children whose parents died of the disease.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_002_009, TRT: 9:31:03 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie was assigned in 2004 to serve as the bishop of the Thirteenth Episcopal District, which included Tennessee and Kentucky. There, she helped pastors create new ministries at their churches. Her jurisdiction included Nashville, Tennessee, which was home to several offices of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church, including the Sunday School Union publishing company, which produced The Christian Recorder newspaper as well

as religious education materials. In addition to her ministerial and administrative duties, McKenzie also established Believe, Incorporated, a nonprofit organization that provided seminary scholarships and grants for small congregations in the region. She served in the Thirteenth Episcopal District until 2012. Additionally, McKenzie describes the educational legacy of the A.M.E. church, which operated numerous historically black colleges and universities. She also talks about the history of the church from the time of its founding at the turn of the 19th century.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_002_010, TRT: 10:31:29 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie served for eight years in the Thirteenth Episcopal District, and was reassigned to the Tenth Episcopal District in 2012. The district was located in Texas, where McKenzie bolstered the African Methodist Episcopal church's support for Dallas' Paul Quinn College; and helped create The Institute at the Abington School of Religion, an online school with continuing education programs for clergy and laypeople. Because of the district's large size, McKenzie focused on fostering unity and community. She also founded Tenth Future, Inc., a nonprofit organization that raised money for local congregations and theological students; and established an endowment fund for the episcopal district. At the time of the interview, McKenzie had published three books, including 'Strength in the Struggle: Leadership Development for Women' in 2001, and 'Swapping Housewives: Rachel and Jacob and Leah' in 2007. She talks about her writing process, as well as the different ways of interpreting the Bible.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_002_011, TRT: 11:28:21 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie was committed to the tradition of social justice in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church. At this point in the interview, she talks about the church's history of community service, including its role in the yellow fever epidemics of the 19th century, the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century and the contaminated water crisis in Flint, Michigan during the 21st century. The church, which operated in Africa and the Caribbean for over a century, was also active in the struggle against South African apartheid. McKenzie talks about the increased opportunities for women in the ministry, and describes her book, 'The Big Deal of Taking Small Steps and Moving Closer to God.' She talks about the value of a strong relationship with God, and explains how pastors can connect with younger generations. McKenzie also describes her plans for the future, which included serving as a bishop of the A.M.E. church until the age of seventy-five years old, when she was required to retire.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_002_012, TRT: 12:19:49 ?

Bishop Vashti McKenzie met U.S. Senator Barack Obama in 2005, when he assembled a group of clergy to develop a plan for recovering from Hurricane Katrina. She later joined his presidential campaign team; and gave sermons at the White House in honor of his inauguration, and at an Easter Prayer Breakfast. After President Obama's election, McKenzie was named to the President's Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, where she helped develop the My Brother's Keeper program. She talks about her family, and her hopes for the African American community. McKenzie also reflects upon her life, legacy and how she would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Bishop Vashti McKenzie, Section A2007_088_MCKENZIE_VASHTI_06_MED_001, TRT: ?

This tape contains footage of Bishop Vashti McKenzie giving a sermon at Howard University. The program was produced by WHUT Howard University Television on April 28, 2007.