

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Smith, Gregory Robeson
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith,
<b>Dates:</b>	January 24, 2007 and July 10, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:36:28).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Foundation chief executive and pastor Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith (1947 - ) was the senior pastor of the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Harlem, New York, and was appointed by President George Bush as the President and CEO of the African Development Foundation. Smith was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on January 24, 2007 and July 10, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_029
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Reverend Gregory Robeson Smith was born on September 22, 1947 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is the Senior Pastor of the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Harlem, New York. His maternal grandfather, Benjamin Congleton Robeson, was very active in the local community activities of Harlem. As a child, Smith's family history was steeped in the history of the church. In 1936, his grandfather became the pastor of Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and his uncle Paul Robeson often

attended and spoke out against the discrimination that existed at the time.

In 1954, Smith earned his diploma from Dewitt Clinton High School in Bronx, New York. He received his B.A. degree in history in 1959 from Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina. Continuing his education, he received his M.B.A. degree in marketing and finance and his M.A. degree in divinity from the University of Wisconsin. He completed his education with his Ph.D. in higher education administration and finance and his Ph.D. in ministries. Smith has integrated his careers as a business executive, public activist and religious leader. He has spent over twenty years working in marketing and finance with several Fortune 500 companies.

In 1990, Smith was appointed by President George Bush as President and CEO of the African Development Foundation, an independent federal agency in Washington, D.C., with offices in twenty-five African nations. Smith continued to serve under the Clinton Administration until May 1995 when he became the Senior Pastor of the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Harlem, New York. The church is known as the “Freedom Church” for the central role it played on the Underground Railroad. It was attended by Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman.

Smith holds positions on several boards. He is Deputy Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masons of the State of New York. Smith is President of the Prince Hall Temple Associates, Inc. and has received the distinction of being one of the Outstanding Men of America.

Smith resides in New York with his wife and family.

Smith was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on January 24, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith was conducted by Adrienne Jones and Shawn Wilson on January 24, 2007 and July 10, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Foundation chief executive and pastor Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith (1947 - ) was the senior pastor of the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Harlem, New York, and was appointed by President George Bush as the President and CEO of the African Development Foundation.

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# 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### Persons:

Smith, Gregory Robeson

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghilea, Neculai (Videographer)

(Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Smith, Gregory Robeson--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Pastor

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Foundation Chief Executive

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ReligionMakers|CivicMakers

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## **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 Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith, January 24, 2007 and July 10, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue,

Chicago, Illinois.

## Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith, Section A2007\_029\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:44 2007/01/24

Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith was born on September 22, 1947 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Bennie Robeson Smith. His maternal great-grandfather, William Drew Robeson, was a former slave who became a pastor. He married Smith's maternal great-grandmother, Maria Bustill Robeson, whose father, Cyrus Bustill, helped found the first Prince Hall Freemasonry lodge. Smith's maternal grandfather, Benjamin Congleton Robeson, attended Biddle University, and was a chaplain in World War I. After the war, he met Smith's maternal grandmother, Frances Cline Robeson. In 1934, his grandfather moved his family to New York City's Harlem community to pastor Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Smith's mother attended Spelman College, and later met his father, who was in the U.S. Navy. Smith was raised by his maternal grandparents in the church parsonage, where his maternal great uncle, Paul Robeson, lived for a time. Smith also recalls the church's many notable attendees,

including Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith, Section A2007\_029\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:08 2007/01/24

Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith grew up on 136th street in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, where he lived with his maternal grandparents in the parsonage of Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. When he was six years old, his great uncle, actor Paul Robeson, briefly lived with them. His grandfather and great uncle received visits from Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Inspired by his uncle's travels, Smith aspired to enter the U.S. Foreign Service. Smith attended The Modern School under Principal Mildred Johnson Edwards, the daughter of composer James Weldon Johnson, and studied African American authors like Paul Laurence Dunbar, W.E.B. Du Bois and Ralph Ellison. In Harlem, he was acquainted with author Countee Cullen and basketball player Wilt Chamberlain. Smith went on to attend the integrated DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, where he prevented from joining the accelerated academic track because of racism. He also played football with Barry Hankerson.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith, Section A2007\_029\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:41 2007/01/24

Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith saw performances at New York City's Apollo Theater, and was chosen to join Peter Wilhousky's All City Chorus while a student at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, New York. When his maternal grandfather died, Smith was sent to live with his paternal grandparents in Philadelphia, where he attended Simon Gratz High School. In 1965, Smith received a scholarship to attend Livingstone College, where he studied history and political science, and played football. He graduated in three years, and was offered a fellowship by the Consortium for Graduate Study in Business for Negroes to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 1969, he was drafted to play for the Dallas Cowboys, but chose to finish his degree at the University of Wisconsin, where he coached the freshman football team. He recalls segregation in Madison, and the bombing of Sterling Hall by the Weather Underground Organization.

Smith earned his M.B.A. degree in 1972, and was recruited to work for the ITT Corporation.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith, Section A2007\_029\_001\_004, TRT: 0:25:53 2007/01/24

Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith was a charter member of the National Black MBA Association at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He worked at the ITT Corporation after graduating, before joining the Ogilvy and Mather advertising agency, where he helped to lead marketing campaigns for Shake 'n Bake and Maxwell House. While working at Lever Brothers Company, where he marketed Aim toothpaste, Smith also served as a White House Fellow under President Gerald Ford, Jr., and met Gloria Tooté at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. In 1977, Smith collaborated with Gordon Parks and Iman to introduce an African American product line at Revlon, Inc. He then became national product manager at Joseph E. Seagram and Sons, Inc. Smith was soon put on executive loan to coordinate relief efforts for the Ethiopian famine through the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. This work eventually led to Smith's appointment as the president of the U.S. African Development Foundation in 1991.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith, Section A2007\_029\_002\_005, TRT: 0:29:00 2007/07/10

Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith's maternal family encouraged him to join the ministry from an early age, but he was drawn to Corporate America and politics. In 1991, he was selected by President George H.W. Bush as president of the U.S. African Development Foundation. There, he helped supervise the South African elections, and met Nelson Mandela and Julius Nyerere, both of whom had corresponded with his great uncle, Paul Robeson. He continued at the U.S. African Development Foundation under President William Bill Clinton until 1995, when he returned to the corporate world as a marketing director for Bell Atlantic Corporation, which became Verizon Communications, Inc. At Verizon, Smith became the director of multicultural marketing, and worked with retail marketing president Bruce Gordon to reach out to black-owned businesses. In 2002, Smith was

hired by New York Governor George Pataki to set up marketing and licensing for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith, Section A2007\_029\_002\_006, TRT: 0:29:19 2007/07/10

Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith's maternal grandfather, Benjamin Congleton Robeson, pastored Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New York City's Harlem. At twenty-one years old, Smith was selected as a church steward by his grandfather's successor. He was called to the ministry in 1980, and earned a master of divinity degree at Union Theological Seminary in New York, under the mentorship of James H. Cone and Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. In his second year at Union Theological Seminary, Smith was asked to pastor his first congregation at Mt. Hope A.M.E. Zion Church in White Plains, New York. He eventually became the presiding elder of all African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches in Washington, D.C. Smith then studied under Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Cornel West at United Theological Seminary in Ohio, with classmates like Reverend Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., earning a doctorate of ministry in 1997. In 2004, Smith returned to Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church as its pastor.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith, Section A2007\_029\_002\_007, TRT: 0:30:05 2007/07/10

Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith became the pastor of Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New York City's Harlem neighborhood in 2004, the same role held by his maternal grandfather from 1934 until his death. At the time of Smith's appointment, membership had fallen. To regain local participation and improve the worship experience, Smith implemented senior and youth programs; built a digital gallery exhibition featuring the works of his maternal great uncle, Paul Robeson; and set up a monetary endowment dedicated to church renovations. Smith was also a member of Prince Hall Freemasonry in New York from 1976. In 1980, he was elected as the master of New York City's Boyer Lodge, where Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Reverend Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker and Smith's grandfather had been members. In



2006, Smith was chosen as deputy grandmaster for the state of New York. He describes the moral code of Prince Hall Freemasonry, and the organization's role in the New York City community.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith, Section A2007\_029\_002\_008, TRT: 0:11:38 2007/07/10

Reverend Dr. Gregory Smith participated in The End of Aids: A Global Summit with Bill Clinton in 2006, alongside U.S. Senator Al Gore and actor Richard Gere. Through the conference, Smith hoped to bring public attention to the HIV crisis, and to prevent the further spread of AIDS in the African American community. He delivered a call to action to other African American leaders, whom he hoped would advocate to fund HIV research, but did not. Smith also talks about the importance of historically black colleges and universities, and expresses his concerns regarding the state of public education. Smith concludes the interview by reflecting upon his legacy at the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New York City's Harlem neighborhood.