

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr.

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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>	Forbes, James A.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr.,
<b>Dates:</b>	September 21, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 uncompressed MOV digital video files (2:45:12).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes (1935 - ) served as the fifth senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City from 1989 to 2007, making him the first African American Senior Minister of one of the largest multicultural and interdenominational churches in the United States. Forbes was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on September 21, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_046
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. was born on September 6, 1935 in Burgaw, North Carolina to James A. Forbes, Sr. and Mabel Clemons Forbes. Forbes was raised as one of eight children in Raleigh, North Carolina. He received his B.S. degree in chemistry from Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1957. At Union Theological Seminary in the New York City, Forbes wrote his master's thesis on Pentecostalism and the Renewal of the Church, and obtained his M.Div. degree in 1962. Forbes earned his clinical pastoral education certificate from the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond in 1968. Forbes earned his D.Min. degree from Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in 1975.

Following his graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary, Forbes returned to Raleigh, North Carolina, where he worked briefly in his father's church, Providence United Holy Church. In 1962, Forbes became a student intern at Olin Binkly Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and went on to pastor Holy Trinity Church in Wilmington, North Carolina; St. Paul's Holy Church in Roxboro, North Carolina; and St. John's United Holy Church of America in Richmond, Virginia. After earning his Clinical Pastoral Education Certificate from the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, Forbes worked as campus minister for Virginia Union University in Richmond. In 1973, Forbes became a director of education for Interfaith Metropolitan Theological Education Inc. in Washington, D.C. In 1976, Forbes joined the faculty at Union Theological Seminary as its Brown and Sockman Associate Professor of Preaching. Forbes became the Union Theological Seminary's first Joe R. Engle Professor of Preaching in 1985. In 1986, Forbes gave the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale University, informing his 1989 publication, *The Holy Spirit & Preaching*. Union Theological Seminary named Forbes the first Harry Emerson Fosdick Adjunct Professor of Preaching in 1989, the same year he was installed as fifth senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City. His installment rendered him the first African American senior minister of one of the largest multicultural and interdenominational congregations in the United States. Following his address

at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, Forbes led an interfaith rally and demonstration at Riverside Church as part of the Church's Mobilization 2004 campaign. In 2007, he formed the Healing of the Nations Foundation, a non-partisan, non-profit, national ministry of healing and spiritual revitalization. That same year, Forbes retired as senior minister emeritus of Riverside Church. He authored *Whose Gospel?: A Concise Guide to Progressive Protestantism* in 2009.

Forbes was the recipient of fourteen honorary degrees, including D.D. degrees from Princeton University, Trinity College, Colgate University, and University of Richmond. In 1996, *Newsweek* recognized Forbes as one of the twelve "most effective preachers" in the English-speaking world.

Forbes and his wife, Bettye Forbes, have one son, James A. Forbes III.

Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on September 21, 2016.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. was conducted by Harriette Cole on September 21, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes (1935 - ) served as the fifth senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City from 1989 to 2007, making him the first African American Senior Minister of one of the largest multicultural and interdenominational churches in the United States.

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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:

Forbes, James A.

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Forbes, James A.--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:

Minister

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ReligionMakers

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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. James A. Forbes, Jr., September 21, 2016. 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).

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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. James A. Forbes, Jr., Section  
A2016\_046\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:14 ?

Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. was born on September 6, 1935 in Burgaw, North Carolina to Mabel Clemons Forbes and James A. Forbes, Sr. His mother was born in Stokes, North Carolina to a family of tobacco farmers. Her father, O.C. Clemons, was a prosperous preacher who gifted the land for the area's first school, which was named in his honor. Each summer, Forbes and his seven siblings traveled to Stokes to help his maternal grandfather harvest and sell tobacco. Forbes' father was born in Greenville, North Carolina and left the sixth grade to help care for his family after his father abandoned them. When Forbes was a child, his father completed his high school education through the American School of Correspondence in Lansing, Illinois. Forbes' father attended Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, and went on to earn his divinity degree. During this time, he became a popular preacher in the area, and also worked as a porter at the W.T. Grant department store in Goldsboro, North Carolina.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., Section  
A2016\_046\_001\_002, TRT: 2:29:33 ?

Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. spent his early childhood in Goldsboro, North Carolina before moving to Raleigh, North Carolina in 1942. Although his parents sought to shelter him from segregation and prejudice in North Carolina, Forbes became aware of the education gap and workplace discrimination at an early age. Upon graduating from George Washington High School in 1953, Forbes opted to attend Howard University in hopes of becoming a doctor. Shortly afterwards, his father began attending Shaw University in Raleigh, and encouraged his children to pursue higher education as well. As a result, all seven of Forbes' siblings were college graduates, including his younger brother, David Forbes, who went on to become the student body president at Shaw University, leading the sit-in movement that desegregated the lunch counters in Raleigh. In 1963, Forbes sat at the Woolworth's lunch counter for the first time, where he was met with fear and disgust from a white patron. He later wrote a poem about the encounter.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., Section  
A2016\_046\_001\_003, TRT: 3:25:38 ?

Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. waited tables while attending Howard University in Washington, D.C. In 1956, he received his call to ministry after hearing Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak. Nevertheless, he graduated with a bachelor's degree in chemistry later that year, and briefly taught science at Kittrell College in Kittrell, North Carolina. While there, he was accepted to Union Theological Seminary in New York City. The seminary embraced diversity, and welcomed Forbes' background in the Pentecostal church. During this time, he ministered to prisoners at Rikers Island, and completed his field work at Church of the Master in New York City under the guidance of pastors James Herman Robinson and Eugene Callender. As a member of the Student Interracial Ministry, he served as an assistant pastor to Robert Seymour at the Olin T. Binkly Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Next,

Forbes pastored at his father's church, and St. John's United Holy Church in Richmond, Virginia.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., Section  
A2016\_046\_001\_004, TRT: 4:30:03 ?

Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. married Bettye Franks Forbes in 1963, shortly before becoming pastor of St. John's United Holy Church in Richmond, Virginia. While there, he also served as the president of the Richmond Urban League and as the campus minister at Virginia Union University. After reading the works of James H. Cone and Reverend Henry Mitchell, he collaborated with local pastors Miles Jones and Raul Nichols to create a course on black theology at Virginia Union University. He also worked with the Interfaith Metropolitan Education, Inc. in Washington, D.C. In 1975, Forbes completed his doctorate of ministry at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, and returned to Union Theological Seminary as a professor. During this time, Forbes authored 'The Holy Spirit and Preaching.' He also preached annually at New York City's Riverside Church, which was established by Harry Emerson Fosdick and the Rockefeller family in 1927. Forbes talks about his wife's role in founding the Ebony Ecumenical Ensemble.

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., Section  
A2016\_046\_001\_005, TRT: 5:31:11 ?

Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. became the fifth senior minister at the Riverside Church in New York City in 1989, making him the first African American to hold that position. Although the church had a progressive history, some of the congregation was initially resistant to his leadership. During his eighteen year tenure there, Forbes worked to make Riverside Church more welcoming and inclusive of homosexual worshippers. He also hosted Nelson Mandela at the church following his release from prison. While at Riverside Church, Forbes founded a Wednesday night prayer service called Space for Grace. In 2007, he resigned from the church, and founded the Healing of the Nations Foundation. He was also hired as the national minister for the Drum Major Institute, an organization founded by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King that focused on education, legislation, training and resource development. In 2009, Forbes published 'Whose Gospel?: A Concise Guide to Progressive Protestantism.'

Video Oral History Interview with Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., Section  
A2016\_046\_001\_006, TRT: 6:19:33 ?

Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr. reflects upon his life and legacy, and shares his advice for aspiring ministers and society at large. Forbes also talks about his family, which includes his wife Bettye Franks Forbes, his son, James A. Forbes III, and two grandchildren. He concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.