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Kokua Hawaii Oral History Project Interview with
Wallace Fukunaga

Wallace Fukunaga
Photo courtesy of the Fukunaga family

The Rev. Wallace Fukunaga served as the campus minister of the United Church of Christ, overseeing the ministry of the Off Center Coffeehouse on Seaview Avenue near the University of Hawaii-Manoa from 1965 to 1972—a period marked by the emergence of the peace movement in Hawaii, an exploration of lifestyles among youths, and the start of the Hawaiian Renaissance.[1] The red brick building housing Off Center Coffee House became a major center for debates and meetings of groups, including gatherings by Kokua Hawaii members. In an admission of wrongdoing for complicities in the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, the United Church of Christ in 1993 issued a formal apology to Native Hawaiians.[2] The former coffee house is now the site of a Hawaiian language immersion preschool. The Rev. Fukunaga was serving as a member of the state Hawaii Civil Rights Commission at the time of the interview in November 15, 2015. He was interviewed at his home in Makiki by Gary T. Kubota.

GK: Good morning, Reverend Fukunaga. Could you tell me where you were raised?

WF: I grew up in the Pawaa-Sheridan area of Honolulu. Back then, there were a lot of little homes and it was somewhat rural. Across the street from my home was a fairly large size farm, with water buffaloes, taken care of by these Chinese men. It was a wonderful place to grow up. We lived in a lane that had all relatives. My immediate cousin and our family would share a furo (Japanese bathtub) that my grandfather had made. When I was in the eighth grade, then we moved to Manoa.

GK: What did your dad do for a living?

WF: He started work at Dairymen's as a teenager at about 15 and worked his way up the ranks. By the time I was in the eighth grade, he had become a production manager of the

1. "The Birth of the Modern Hawaiian Movement: Kalama Valley, Oahu;" Haunani Kay-Trask; Hawaiian Historical Society, 1987.
2. United Church of Christ apology to Native Hawaiians. Leaders speeches, 1993.

ice-cream division. He worked there when it turned to Meadow Gold for 50 to 60 years. It was a real long time.

GK: How did you get accepted to Harvard University?

WF: I don't know. All I know is that apparently, I did well enough at McKinley High School, not only academically but also in terms of extracurricular activities. In my junior year at McKinley, I wrote an essay about the United Nations that won a contest and a trip to Washington, D.C. The contest was called a "Pilgrimage For Youth."

GK: Wow.

WF: There were 50 to 60 of us. Then from there, McKinley High School arranged for me to go to the encampment for citizenship in Filson, New York. The visit was for about a month. With me were all kinds of people in all fields—labor, newspapers, universities. We went to the home of Eleanor Roosevelt (wife of the late President Theodore Roosevelt), and met with her. To make a long story short, at one of our events, I met a professor from Harvard, who mentioned to me I might want to consider applying to Harvard. When I came back to Hawaii, my high school advisor Mary Sutherland encouraged me to do so, so I did.

GK: What happened?

WF: (Laughs) I ended up not only getting admitted, but also was offered what was then known as a national scholarship. The next day, I received a letter from Yale University, and I was admitted to Yale.

GK: When was that?

WF: 1956. Back then, a school like Harvard attempted to—and it was good public relations—to put itself forward as a school of diversity, of being somewhat inclusive, of having public school students, not only from the East Coast but also from the whole United States. I think at some point, I just fitted within that profile, of Harvard wanting perhaps to have an Asian. There were other Asians. We were small in number. But at least the school could say it had a real cross section of students.

GK: What did you do after graduating from Harvard?

WF: I went from Harvard to Stanford Law School. But I realized at Stanford, that law school was not suited to my DNA, because the pursuit of law is so linear and adversarial. I was more interested in that which was more universal and spiritual, or if you will, theological.

GK: How did that choice tie into your past?

WF: In high school at McKinley, I sort of became converted to Christianity by going to a youth camp sponsored by Makiki Christian Church. As I was growing up, there was a group that played basketball at the church. Gene Tanabe was a youth leader and he invited us to go to a camp "for free." When the word free came up, eh, man, we would jump. The speaker at the camp was Paul Nagano, a very charismatic kind of guy from California. . . He just gave the altar call at the camp one night and several of us came forward to say, "Yes," and the rest is history. I started becoming more involved.

GK: Were you involved as a Christian while attending college?

WF: I was active at the Park Street Church in Boston. It's the one that sent the first missionaries to Hawaii in 1820. In college, I was already asking—or being more concerned with—theological questions. I took a course from George Buttrick, a preacher and professor of ethics at Harvard. It was very exciting. He opened my mind to a new way of perceiving or understanding the Christian faith in a much more open and inclusive way. He had gone to Princeton Theological Seminary as a visiting professor, and I had been corresponding with him, and I said, "You know what Dr. Buttrick. . . Law is not sitting well with me." So, he said, "Well, why don't you consider going to seminary if you will? I'm going to be at Princeton. Do you want to go to Princeton?" (Laughs) So I did. I just transferred from law school to seminary, and that's it. I received a Master of Divinity. Much later, I received my doctorate in divinity from Pacific University.

GK: So how did you make the transition from Boston to the University of Hawaii campus ministry in Manoa?

WF: It was a time when all the churches felt the need to strengthen its presence on the university campus, because they realized that a lot of students in that age group were beginning to leave churches. When I was a student at Princeton, Joe Bevilacqua who was the conference minister of United Church Of Christ in Hawaii flew over and wanted to interview me to see if I was interested in becoming the campus minister. He also knew I had done one year of a Danforth Fellowship at Berkeley when I was in seminary. The Danforth Foundation was encouraging people to consider the university ministry. They were offering these wonderful fellowships for a whole year. You can live on the campus for a whole year and be with the campus ministry. I did it at Berkeley and I found it very gratifying. I was finishing seminary at the conference here at the United Church of Christ, when the church called me and hired me to be the University of Hawaii minister. I started there about 1965 and ended there in 1972.

GK: So how did you come up with the idea of a coffee house ministry?

WF: Having just come from the East Coast, I had this idea—"Why not change the student center into a coffee house, because the coffee house is more inviting, more open? You know students, instead of saying, I'm going to church, would rather say, "I'm going to Off Center." We made our program a lot more inviting. We had open mic one night. We included a lot of political conversations. We had an open forum on the Vietnam War, on

gay rights, gay liberation that was just beginning, civil rights, tent city, free university—all kinds of stuff that was happening at the university.

GK: How did activism such as groups like Kokua Hawaii fit into your ministry?

WF: The question might be better asked, "How does it fit within your Christian faith?" The ministry is a bit too static or organized. It speaks of an organizational thing, whereas the Christian faith is in and of itself more open and vital and vibrant. Let's speak about the word, "Off Center." The word was purposefully selected to convey the notion or the thought that we wanted to deal with life's ambiguities as well as that which is always at the margin of our society, not necessarily within the center. We wanted to deal with that which raises questions, more than giving answers. It fits really within the context of the Christian faith, because the Christian faith is born out of acknowledging that we don't have the answers altogether. The Christian faith is not a matter of certainty. Otherwise, it's not faith; it's certainty. It wants to be more open again and about wanting to be inclusive. The other part of the faith is it's always concerned about justice. It's always concerned about whether the dignity of a human being and the person's freedom, and the person's God-given spirit, is being duly acknowledged. That's the essence.

When Jesus said, "I'm calling you to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the imprisoned," the Christian faith acknowledges that if you're going to deal with issues of human dignity and freedom, then at some point you've got to deal with the practical needs of people, with the practical aspirations of people, and the actual struggles of people.

Before Kalama Valley and Kokua Hawaii, the Off Center was the place where the burning of a draft card took place.

GK: Oh really?

WF: Yes, it was done by Wayne Hayashi and Stan Masui. These were early founders of the (Vietnam War) Resistance movement at the University of Hawaii. One night there was a gathering of the Resistance. I happened to be in the office in the back, when all of sudden, somebody came in and said, "Guess what? They're burning their draft cards." We were very frankly involved in events at the cutting edge of a number of movements. The first impulse for a free university started among people gathering at the Off Center. The first impulse for a Tent City and Bachman Hall sit-in started at the Off Center. I guess leaders of movements—Noel Kent and John Warner—were all coming to the Off Center to discuss, mobilize, and plot, and so forth.

My role as campus minister was to not just open our doors, but also to listen and engage and then really, frankly, to connect with these movements with the church, with society, so that they are not in isolation, they are not there to remain on the fringe all together. That's the context in which Off Center then became a place where the issue of Kalama Valley erupted.

GK: Tell me about Kokua Hawaii leader Lawrence Kamakawiwoole?

WF: I happened to be a close friend with Larry. He was helping us at the Off Center. He, in fact, took over one summer when I was on leave. He already had his Master of Divinity. He was getting his Master of Education. At the same time, he was hired by the University of Hawaii to become one of the early movers of Ethnic Studies. Larry and I would often sit down and talk story. Off Center was not only a place that allowed human aspirations of people for justice to take place and for dignity and freedom, but also went beyond that to a place where dialogue—critical, critical, critical thinking which includes criticism—can occur. I want to make that clear. As a pastor at the Off Center, I didn't want to just open my doors. I tried my best to be there all the time and to sit in on meetings and to lend my voice and, when needed, to raise some critical questions.

GK: How did that translate in terms of helping Kalama Valley residents and Kokua Hawaii?

WF: I saw our role as helpers—feed the hungry and clothe the naked. We did a lot of social outreach. When the Kalama Valley struggle occurred, I had already begun to be in close communication with not only Larry, but also other Kokua Hawaii leaders Kalani Ohelo and Soli Niheu. One of our roles was to bring food. So, I solicited the churches like Crossroads church. Some of the ladies still remember and tell me, "Oh honey, you remember when we used to go over there, bring the pot of stew?" (Laughs)

GK: You took church members to Kalama Valley?

WF: I said, "Look, if you guys are going to make the stew and rice, you got to come with me so you can meet them and get to know what the issues are and what's going on." Our association with Kalama Valley was educational too.

GK: What was the point?

WF: To open their hearts and minds. My point is that there are so many different facets for what we're doing. Much of them arose not only out of the Christian faith, but also out of a quest to make our faith become alive. How do we make such an event become a learning instrument for the larger community? That's what happened.

GK: Did you run into opposition?

WF: Of course, yes. We became controversial. There was a fairly significant segment of the institution of the church that found what we were doing rather unsettling—threatening, really. There is a segment of Christianity that had become and had for a long time been organized for the rich, the established and powerful. Kalama Valley, the Resistance movement, free university, the anti-war movement—all of that was viewed as un-American or perhaps trouble-making, irresponsible and so forth. So, here we were at the university campus ministry at Off Center, and we're embracing all of it. (Laughs)

GK: What was your response?

WF: Well, at an annual event of United Church Of Christ, there were questions raised. By that point, we were fortunate because we were able to raise money from other sources—the Episcopal Church and other denominations that liked what we were doing and may have not had the same kind of program or presence as we had started. They would give certain kind of funding support to us. Of course, that meant I had to apply. I knew I needed to use whatever gift I had in terms of writing and speaking, so that's what I did. I wrote articles. I got interviewed, and I would go to any church that wanted me to talk to them.

So, while we were still dependent on the United Church of Christ for our funding, we were also able to get funding from other sources. We saw ourselves as servants, and we do it out of the spirit acknowledging we're simply a vessel, and instrument.

GK: So the support from within the Christian community never waned?

WF: While there was criticism, there was support from the same people as well—people saying, "We're not sure what you're doing completely, but it's okay. We're going to vote 'yes,' when it comes to continuing support of the ministry." (Laughs) So there was always enough support.

GK: (Laughs)

WF: It's a learning curve. Everything is a learning curve. Instead of becoming reactionary myself or adversarial, I used that all as a way to affirm our common humanity. That's the kind of stuff I wanted, for us to become an expression or manifestation more real than all the politics.

GK: What's your sense of what happened?

WF: Look at Kalama Valley today. The developer did exactly what they wanted. It's a place for all these fairly high-priced homes. Nonetheless, the movement was very important and valid for the protest to be made because it was such a historical moment. It became in the eyes and minds of a lot of people a kind of a turning point in the Hawaiian movement in Hawaii.

GK: So, how do you feel about it?

WF: What's interesting is, when I left the campus ministry and started working at the Community Church in Honolulu, there was Kokua Hawaii member Soli Niheu attending church on one of my early Sundays. He came for several Sundays. Soli came with the idea that, he said, "Hey, Wallace, I want to give you support." Kokua Hawaii's whole thing was about support, and I'm always ever grateful for that.