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Interview with Susie Marshall, 29 October 1991

Lisa K. Speer

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Interviewer: Lisa K. Speer
Interviewee: Susie Marshall
Date: October 29, 1991
Location: Oxford, Mississippi

Speer: Mrs. Marshall, how long have you been a member of the Oxford Church Women United?

Marshall: I've been a member since 19..., since it was organized really, 1962. We had, before then we started with the World Day of Prayer kind of session that was started by a retired missionary, Mrs. Gayle Beanland. She was interested, she was a Presbyterian, she was interested in the groups getting together because the whites were having their World Day of Prayer and the blacks were having theirs in the Methodist Churches and she wanted the groups to get together. So she kind of brought us together.

Speer: And that was in 19...

Marshall: That was in 19... Now that was in 1957.

Speer: 1957. So the roots go back a long time in Oxford. Is this the only Church Women United chapter that you've ever been a member of?

Marshall: Yes.

Speer: You've lived in Oxford most of your life?

Marshall: Most of my life.

Speer: Why did you join Church Women United, or maybe you just want to tell me a little about how you got involved in it.

Marshall: Really for, to get a relationship, to get an understanding, to know each other cause we didn't know each other, we still don't but we're working on it, but at that time we didn't know anything about what their [white] churches were doing when it comes to services and the race relations wasn't too good at that time you know, coming out of well a lot of things that happened before then. And I just wanted to know more about what they were doing in their churches and try to understand them and become friends.

Speer: What church do you attend?

Marshall: Second Baptist here in Oxford.

Speer: Who were the founders, the original members of Oxford's Church Women United?

Marshall: The original members were, as I said we started with the World Day of Prayer, and there were I think it's about eight women, Baptist, Methodist, CME Episcopal, and the founder, well which led to Mrs. Gayle Beanland asking whether who would head up the organization once we got started and the minister's wife of the United Methodist church, who was a black woman said that she would so she became the first chairperson.

Speer: And who was this?

Marshall: Samantha Redmond.

Speer: Presently what Oxford Churches are involved in Church Women United?

Marshall: We have about ten or eleven churches. We have well I'll start with the Catholic Church, St. John's Catholic Church, First Presbyterian, St. Peter's Episcopal Church, First Baptist [inaudible], Second Baptist, East Providence, Burns United Methodist, [inaudible] and two more Baptist churches I think, St. John I believe and South Hopewell. About eleven.

Speer: So you have a lot of women from many different denominations working together. Does that ever, do you ever run into any problems because of the different denominations all trying to work together?

Marshall: Well I think this was our purpose and goal so that you know to try to understand and work together with each other. I think all of us felt the need after having World Day of Prayer. Now at that time we had it every month from one place, from one house to the other, World Day of Prayer and it was suggested that after we were organized and the churches united just have one particular set day that was on the calendar for the national World Day of Prayer.

Speer: Do any new churches now join, or members from new churches or is it pretty much the same church have been working together for a long time?

Marshall: It's pretty much the same churches, now we did have one lady from Christian Science or something like that, I forgot her name. She was the historian once but she's not coming any more.

Speer: If you are in a church that, well if you were a member of a church that wasn't participating in Church Women United could you still join the group?

Marshall: Yes. Because we have our celebrations, we have three celebrations each year and we have it published in the paper when the meeting time and the public is invited to come.

Speer: Specifically, you have been President of Church Women United in the past.

Marshall: Yes, I was president in 1968 and now I'm president. I was elected president in 90 and this is my last year. It's a two year tenure.

Speer: What other leadership positions have you held?

Marshall: Well I've had, I think I had leadership education once and chairperson of the celebrations, Christian World relations... [inaudible]

Speer: Well I know that you are a busy person because I have a hard time tracking you down sometimes. Has Church Women United, or your work with Church Women United taken you to lots of different place across the United States or across the world?

Marshall: Yes. When I, in 1965 I believe was when we were really involved in a big way with the white churches, with the white Church Women United ladies, we had, I suggested we have a tea and the funds that were raised from the tea, part of it would be used to send me to New York City...

Speer: The Silver Tea?

Marshall: Yes. The Silver Tea we have in September. We called it at that time a fellowship tea or a membership tea one and I went to New York for Church Women United's training session I believe they called it and I learned a lot. I went to Purdue University for a national Church Women United meeting and not too many far away places because we send delegates. They have been in Kansas City, Wichita, Kansas, Los Angeles and Atlanta, but we sent delegates but I only went twice.

Speer: Are you going to the Jubilee celebration in St. Louis?

Marshall: Yes, I plan to go. Two of us plan to go.

Speer: It's coming up soon.

Marshall: Right the 9th through the 12th of September, November.

Speer: November, that's right.

Speer: What are some of the activities, besides the Silver Tea that Church Women United regularly participates in? Who do these activities benefit?

Marshall: Now we have every year, other than the three celebrations, is that what you want...

Speer: Including those.

Marshall: Including the three celebrations, now the first celebration is in March, the first Friday in March, every year and that World Day of Prayer, that's is March. World Day of Prayer is the first Friday in March and May Fellowship is the first Friday in May. World Community Day is celebrated the first Friday in November, yearly, and the Silver Tea or the Fellowship Tea is in September each year. I think the minutes says we's supposed to have on it on the fourth Sunday in September each year but it varies from the second to the fourth. And then we have a Christmas musical which involves the public, we invite different group like the organizations, community organizations to participate and this we hope will help us with our relationships, our social relationships.

Speer: What does the Church Women United here in Oxford do to Cil, like the World Day of Prayer and World Community Day? How do you observe those here?

Marshall: Well, we uh, we invite different groups and foreign students to be on, to take part in the program. The program's already outlined by the national group and they are sent to us. We get people involved who are on the campus, university students and professional people in our city and also from the university to take a part. Now this time they're having, for our World Community Day, we will have different people representing countries like Africa, 'cause all of us is supposed to be representing a country if we don't find anybody you know, but we do have African and Indians and all you know if we could get them to come take a part and them um, well we have worship, prayer and then we study the program that's outlined.

Speer: Who benefits from things like the Silver Tea...

Marshall: The children.

Speer: I know you said when it first started...

Marshall: Right, now that was for membership and we had as many as 64 members...

Speer: Tell me a little bit about the Children's Project because I saw a lot of things mentioned about that in the scrapbooks. What is the Children's Project? How it is run?

Marshall: The Children's Project was started way back in the sixties because the children, especially after integration, when the children, especially the poor, the children who were poverty...children who had only just one parent. We had people, when I say people, a person from Church Women United, to go to the schools and find out from the teachers, we still do this, the

children who need shoes or clothes, whatever, to make them feel better about their appearance, and well we started off giving money and boxes and paying for their lunches, their school lunches. I was reading where we sent ninety dollars to the schools here in town and so much money to Head Start when they started to help with the program of feeding the children, to help with the program of Head Start.

Speer: I noticed in the scrapbook that Church Women had gotten a certificate of Appreciation from Head Start and I was wondering what the involvement was.

Marshall: And then we would, another thing that we do, or that we did, we would get library books and take them to Head Start and read the stories, you know, we would help the teaches with the story hour for the children.

Speer: Is Church Women United still involved with project Head Start in Oxford or does the project still exist.

Marshall: Head Start? Yes it still exists but we don't since the government has given so much support now to them, Church Women United is not directly involved when it comes to helping them with the funds and the fees, therefore if we can be of any help, we let them know that we would be glad to help them with when it comes to library, taking the children to library, and going with them on trips when they go to the zoo whatever...

Speer: But you do still maintain the Children's Project?

Marshall: Oh yes. This is what the money is for when we have the Silver Tea. The money is used for the Children's Project and Mrs. Doris Murry is the treasurer...[this year] I think we raised about four hundred something dollars.

Speer: Now do, if I understand how it operates, is this a project that Church Women United came up with?

Marshall: Right, started, way back there in 1967, 68, 69... And then they do still have a person, from Church Women United who goes to each one the schools and find out if the children need shoes. Course we buy new things now, new shoes and new clothes...

Speer: That's a very good project.

Marshall: I think so. It's the only one we have really.

[skipped some information not relevant to Church Women United]

Speer: What are some of the concerns of Church Women United, not just for Oxford but for Mississippi as a whole? Some of the projects that Church Women United in the state works on?

Marshall: Well I think mainly as a whole we are concerned with social justice, especially with poverty of women and children. In fact this is our five year imperative.

Speer: Is that the plan that I've read about, is there a four year plan or a five year plan? Can you tell me a little about that.

Marshall: Well the five year plan, what we've been doing in Church Women United now, it's called "Imperative: The Five Year Plan", its working, trying to find a way to help women and children who are in poverty. Now what we have been doing, we meet together and we discuss, we might feel like we have done very little, but if we can study the scriptures together, meet together, I mean with black and white women meeting together and planning and even though we might not execute any plans, we do by writing letters to our Congressmen and ask them to support bills that concern women and children in poverty.

Speer: There are four, if I understood correctly what I read, four Church Women United chapters in Mississippi, one in Greenville, another in Jackson, the one here is Oxford and another on the Gulf Coast. Does the Oxford Church Women United ever work with these other chapters on any projects or do you meet together as a whole ever.

Marshall. Yes. In fact we're just from a state assembly in Greenville, Mississippi last weekend...but we really have more than four. We have one in Holly Springs, one in Coldwater and one in Pontotoc. They've just come in the last two years.

Speer: Did Oxford Church Women United participate in the 1960s in the Women in Community Service project (WICS)? I had noticed something in the scrapbook about WICS project from the national office.

Marshall: We did. I remember when one of the directors on the national level... came down from New York City. She came to our meeting...and she told us about this WIC's program, Women in Community Service, what we could do, give us the guidelines, what we could do to help young women, really young women who were having babies you know 'bout how they could get milk. How they could be helped. She gave us guidelines on what we could do to help them get the things that would be paid for by the government.

Speer: I don't know, I may be confusing this with something else, but didn't this sometimes also provide young women with jobs in the community?

Marshall: Yes, I believe you are right.

Speer: I also read something about Church Women United doing work with women in prison.

Marshall: Yes, I tell you we had them, we we're trying to do something with them get a Christmas project thing together, but we have them, a group of prisoners to come over and do a seminar, a program for us. After that we sent blankets and funds that could be used for the women in prison at Parchman, I think it's at Marks or Lambert, one.

Speer: You said they sent women over to do a program. What kinds of things did they talk about?

Marshall: They just told about what they were involved in as kind of a warning to the young people to stay out of trouble. They talked about, about three or four of them, about how they had repented. It was just a good program for the young adults.

Speer: Turning now to the early years of Church Women United, has the organization been interracial from the beginning?

Marshall: No. We started out with fourteen black women from black churches and the white women came in later.

Speer: When did the white women come in?

Marshall: I believe it was after it was organized. It was about two years later, but we started about '57 and so it was organized in '62, so the white women came in about '63.

Speer: How did Oxford respond to the group once it was interracial or biracial? I had read a lot or a few things that don't apply to the Oxford chapter that Senator Theodore Bilbo had said about the national organization in the 1940s. Some really sharp criticisms, and I wondered if the Church Women United group in Oxford ever experienced any of that kind of prejudice from the community.

Marshall: Well, we didn't not openly. We'll say it like that, not openly. But one thing I know the white Baptist church didn't come in when the other white churches did. It finally joined, and we had one or two people from the white Baptist church... [inaudible]...but they're coming in. We had a meeting in the white Baptist church last year. I saw in the minutes where we had Vacation Bible school together...in 1970 I believe.

Speer: I know that Dr. Hawks had mentioned to me that for a long time the Oxford Eagle did not report on Church Women United activities. Was that because of some prejudice against the group's makeup?

Marshall: I'm sure it was. That's what we're about, trying to do something about, social justice, and I think that the churches, church women should take the lead in this. We've been able to go many places as a group together, black and white church women, that we had never experienced going before by [though Church Women

United].

Speer: Has Church Women United ever experienced any internal problems because of the black and white women working together? Has that ever caused a problem with the members or have you ever run into any stumbling blocks because of it?

Marshall: Well, not that I know of.

Speer: In 1961, Church Women United initiated the program Assignment: Race. (Marshall doesn't remember; refers me to Dorothy Henderson, ecumenical development)

Speer: Like you said, one of Church Women's main concerns is social justice. Do you think that Church Women United here in Oxford has been successful in helping the black and white communities come together.

Marshall: I think so, not altogether, but there's been lots of improvement you know about that. Talks about some changes in race relations that in general probably have not evolved directly from Church Women United's work.

Speer: Do you think there's more work for Church Women United in that area?

Marshall: Yes. The fact is that we don't have any, not many people want to become members or come along with us...to join forces with us. We don't have as many as we used to come in and say they want to be involved with Church Women United.

Speer: Do you have any specific areas right now that are targeted for improvement?

Marshall: Well, we are getting a new president and I think that she has a lot of, she has grand ideas and that is, well I know we should do more meeting together as we did when we first started. We called it living room dialogue you know, black women and white women, sitting down and discussing what needs to be done the concerns and needs of Oxford community over a cup of tea, on a one on one basis or two or three get together and just talk. And this is what this president plans to do whose coming in. I'm outgoing.

Speer: Who is the incoming president?

Marshall: Trudy Pojman...irrelevant material...

Speer: 1964 and 1965, Church Women United was involved in a project called "Wednesdays in Mississippi" and this I guess would have been during Freedom Summer...

Marshall: And during the peak time of integration. I think this is when the white women started coming down to talk with the southern black women about some of the things that, to get together on with the blacks. I think this is what happened when Wednesday's in Mississippi.

Speer: So it largely concerned school desegregation?

Marshall: Right. (Refers me to state president Shirley Watkins and to a book that talks about Wednesday's in Mississippi. Doesn't remember title, and national president Clarie Collins Harvey, who lives in Jackson.

Speer: In 1966 the national president Edna Sinclair and Margaret Shannon came to Mississippi to talk with Church Women United leaders...

Marshall: 1967?

Speer: 1966 is the year I have, but that may be wrong.

Marshall: Well I don't remember too much why they came. Refers me to Dorothy Henderson and Willie Hume Bryant. Well anyway too they were seeking justice too for black women....

Speer: Was church Women United in Oxford involved in the desegregation of the local schools.

Marshall: Yes, we sure were. Well some of the members of Church Women United now, whose names appear on our list, Mildred Quarrels was one of the ones, she is Church Woman United lady, I think she was in the filing of the suit, transportation I believe it was, getting transportation for the black children and we supported her....[irrelevant material]

Speer: So a lot of Church Women United members as individuals were involved, but did the group as a whole take a stand on it or do anything to facilitate it?

Marshall: Yes I remember reading in the secretary's book where Mrs. Alton Bryant suggested that Church Women United write a letter to support public education, I believe the letter said. Church Women United agreed to send five dollars (doesn't know what for) to support public education.

Speer: Do you remembers Operation Listen in the late 1960s?

Marshall: I don't remember too much about Operation Listen other than uh, when we would invite the ministers to come to us and in our, especially May fellowship days and talk to us about the problems of that time you know, after desegregation of schools and we would try to listen and weigh what we as Church Women United

would say to each other, not use harsh words but be careful about the words that would cause a bad relation between us as Church Women United. That's all I can remember that we did. We invited the ministers to come and give us some...some things that we could do to help the relationships among ourselves and with the people in the community 'cause a lot of people you know they felt really hostile about desegregation of the schools. And then a lot of them you know were in favor of it. When I was teaching I was one of the first ones to come up, I always taught in the county, and I was one of the two who came to Lafayette to teach and they sent two of the white teachers down to the school where I was teaching to make the transition easier.

Speer: That's all the questions I had about Church Women United, but if there's anything I haven't covered that you would like to talk about I would be more than happy to hear it.