

SOLOS FROM THE CHOIR

A BOSTON BLACK CHURCH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Project & Interview Guide

WHAT?

Solos from the Choir is an Oral History project that documents the history of the Black Church and the Black Christian experience in Greater Boston through audio-recorded interviews with senior congregants, clergy and community members.

WHY?

Capturing the oral histories of Black senior saints *inspires reflection, preserves tradition* and helps *give insight into assets and resources* within churches that enable them to perform effective ministry.

WHO?

Solos from the Choir is an initiative of the [Boston Black Church Vitality Project](#) (BBCVP) in partnership with BBCVP stakeholder churches. Interviews are conducted by and with congregants from these churches.

WHERE?

Interviews are currently being conducted online via Zoom due to health risks posed by COVID-19. These audio files will be transcribed and housed in a research library at the Institute for the Study of the Black Christian Experience at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary.

WHEN?

Fall 2020- Spring 2021

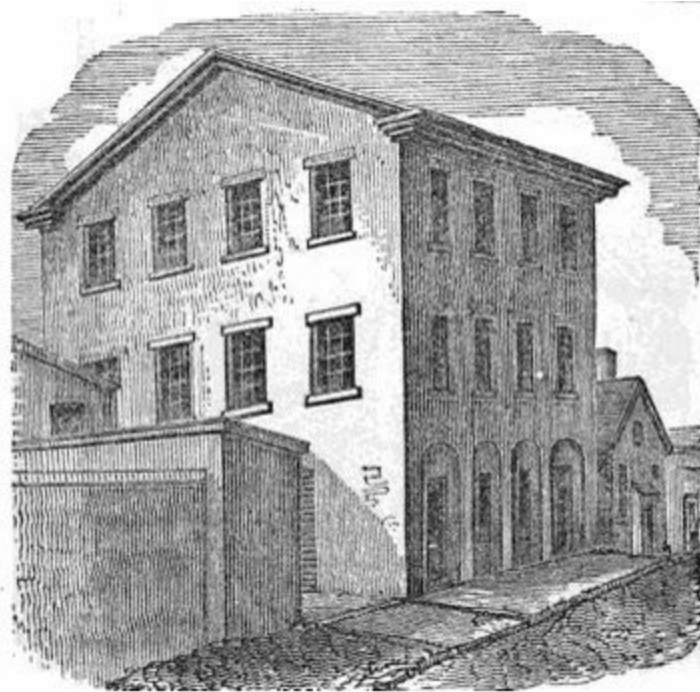
HOW?

That's what this guide is here to tell you! Please read the guide in its entirety. If you have any questions email the BBCVP team at info@blackchurchvitality.com

ORAL HISTORY AND THE BLACK CHURCH IN BOSTON

One thing human beings all have in common is stories. Stories are celebrated and remembered, told and retold by humans from every tribe and time in history.

The story of the Black Church in America has its roots set in a tradition that can be traced back to Africa in the role of the griot, the ancient African storyteller. The griot's work and purpose was to preserve the history of the people and their culture by telling their story. Think of how important it was for the identity and



The First African Baptist Church, established 1805

This congregation completed the construction of the African Meeting House (pictured above). Financed and built completely by Black people, it is also the oldest Black church building in the United States.

faith of ancient Israel to remember the works of the Lord in delivering them from slavery in Egypt. It's so important to remember history that the Lord commands the Israelites to do so! Let's read Deuteronomy 6:20-23:

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent signs and wonders—great and terrible—on Egypt and

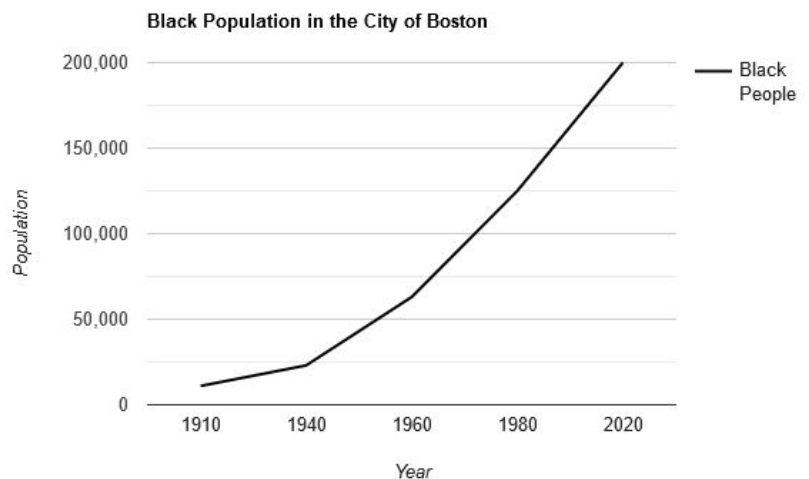
Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors.

God commands us to remember our history because our history helps us understand who God is. We know that God is mighty, powerful and intervenes on behalf of His people because we have the stories to prove it! And those stories don't end in scripture- God is at work in our own lives and in our own story as Black people in America.

African griots and the tradition of storytelling were transported to America where enslaved griots became the plantation storyteller, then the emancipated preacher and finally, today's Black ministers, leaders and elders.¹ Robert C. Hayden, a historian of African Americans in Boston writes that:

*The Black Church became the vehicle for preserving Black culture in a strange land. It is the only institution of and for Black Americans, which started in the African forests, survived slavery and remains perhaps the most viable organization of the Black community in the United States. Indeed, the one Black institution which has had the greatest influence on the lives of Black people in America has been the Black Church.*²

The City of Boston's Black population has grown from 11,000 in 1910 to nearly 200,000 in 2020. These years of growth in Boston's Black community correspond with important social and cultural movements that were and remain important for the progress of Black people all across the United States. The Black Church has historically



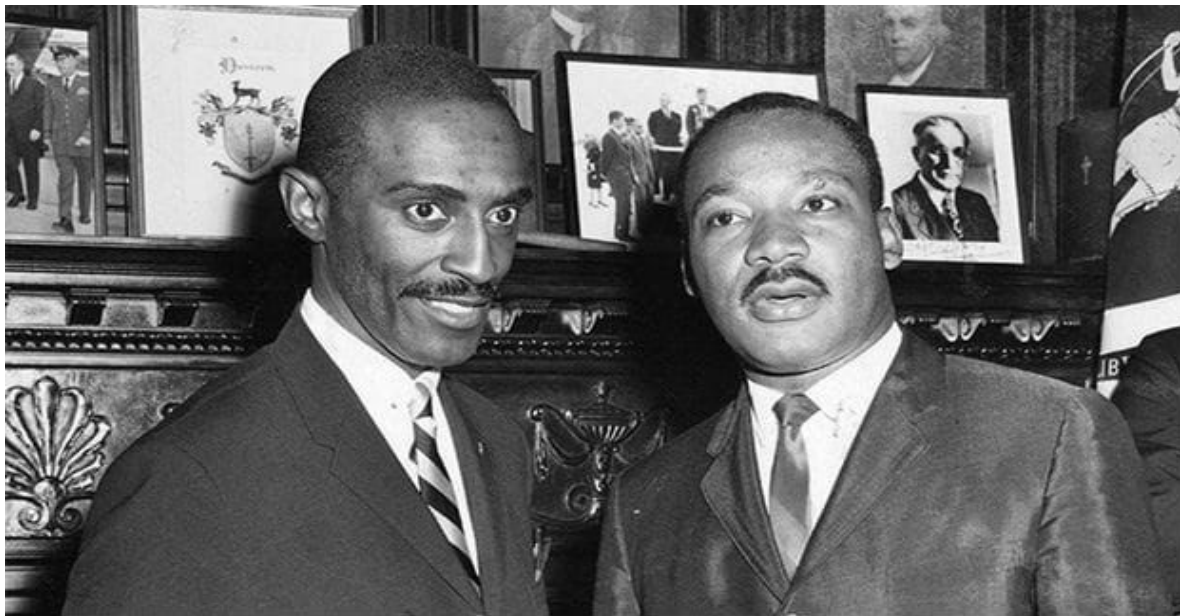
¹ Hayden, Robert. C. *Faith, Culture and Leadership: A History of the Black Church In Boston*. Boston Branch NAACP, 1983, 1.

² Ibid

been a place for Black people not only to worship but to mobilize and organize for social change. The church has served as a hub for social services, education, employment, voter registration, child care and more! Nothing has been off-limits to the Black Church.

It's important for young folks today to know the history, contributions and impact of the Black churches on the life and progress of Black people in the City of Boston. By performing these interviews and recording these stories you are not only learning your own history, but you are preserving Black history for everyone. Think of yourself as a modern-day griot!

Today, there are over 250 Black Churches in Boston. To learn more about them, visit blackchurchvitality.com where you can search an interactive map and locate churches by denomination, ethnicity and neighborhood.



Did you know Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. went to graduate school at Boston University and preached at Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury? Twelfth Baptist Church was established in 1840 and is a historical descendant of the The African Baptist Church at the African Meeting House (1805). Here he is, pictured with Rev. Michael E. Haynes, 11th pastor of Twelfth and a legend in his own right. What legends do you have in your congregation?

WHO WILL YOU INTERVIEW?

Select an Elder

Select the elder you want to honor with your interview. The ideal interviewee is not only willing and able to be interviewed but one who can provide a reflective, historical perspective on their years as a Christian coming up in Boston.

You are encouraged to choose elders who are 70 years of age or older.

Some additional considerations for selecting an interviewee include:

1. How long have they been a part of your congregation?
2. Have they served in ministries or witnessed major church transitions, such as a change in location or pastoral leadership?
3. Have they been active in their community outside of church?
4. Are they looking for ways to engage more deeply in ministry now?

These are just a few things to consider. If you have elders that have been a part of your church for decades, or you answered 'yes' to any of the questions 2-4, then that elder may be a good candidate to interview.

TIP: "Good talkers" or elders that are known for their storytelling are not the only candidates you should consider. Dig a little deeper and look around-- maybe this is an opportunity to hear a story you haven't heard before.

Invite them to be interviewed

Once you have selected your elder, invite them to be interviewed. Share with them that you are conducting an oral history project and you would like them to share their experience as a Black Christian in Boston with you. Explain to them why you chose to honor them specifically with this interview and why it's important to you. If it's helpful, share the project flyer and any other information that will help you clarify what you're inviting them to be a part of.

TIP: Make it personal! When approaching the elder with an interview request, share with them why their story matters to you.

PREPARING QUESTIONS, PLACE AND TECHNOLOGY

Review, Select and Share Your Questions

Plan for an interview that will last 60-90 minutes.

Review

Read through the Interview Questions document and familiarize yourself with the questions. The interview questions are divided into two sections. The first section is 12 required questions that every person being interviewed should answer. Please also choose 4-6 additional questions from the optional questions or include your own questions.

TIP: When selecting optional questions or writing your own, choose ones that interest you! What question would you like to know the answer to? It's also a good idea to consult with the elder you are interviewing. What would they like to talk about?

Share

Once you have selected your questions, share them with the elder you are interviewing. Allow them to ask any questions they may have regarding the interview process. This will enable them to prepare for your conversation.

Find a Quiet, Comfortable Place to Meet

Arrange a time when you and the elder you are interviewing will be relaxed, alert and uninterrupted.

Meeting in Person

Due to COVID-19, we advise meeting in person only if you live in the same household as the person you are interviewing.

Meeting on Zoom

Make sure Zoom is installed and updated on your device. The interview will be captured using the record feature on the app. We also advise the use of headphones to ensure that you can hear questions and aid overall sound quality.

If needed, the BBCVP can drop a technology kit (iPad and headphones) to use for the interview. We are also available to walk you through the process of installing Zoom onto your device by phone.

Get Ready to Record

If using a phone

Make sure your phone has at least 500MB of available storage space as audio files can be large. Test the application you will be using to make sure you are familiar and comfortable with it.

Note: A phone recording option is appropriate if you are doing an in-person interview or if access to Zoom is limited. If you plan on using a phone to record, please let the BBCVP team know so we can plan and troubleshoot together.

If Using Zoom

All interviews that take place over Zoom will take place on the BBCVP Zoom account. The BBCVP team will provide you with the password and login information when it is time to conduct your interview. This way when you record your interview, it will automatically be stored in the Cloud associated with the BBCVP Zoom account.

Directions for using Zoom:

1. Log in to Zoom using the email and password provided to you by the BBCVP team
2. On the left side menu click “Meetings”
3. Select “Start Meeting” next to your scheduled meeting
4. Once you and the Interviewee have logged on and are ready to begin your conversation, hit the “Record” button

Note: The BBCVP team will assist in scheduling meetings. The Recording Settings on the BBCVP Zoom account are already set to upload to the Cloud, all you have to do is press the record button when you’re ready!

Have the Interviewee sign the Release Form

We ask that each interviewee sign a form acknowledging that their story will be archived with the Institute for the Study of the Black Christian Experience and might be used for ministry, educational and research purposes.

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

Introduce Yourself

Start your recording with an introduction so that anyone who listens to the interview knows who you and the elder you are interviewing are.

Sample Script:

My name is (interviewer's full name) I am (age) years old. Today is (Month, Day, Year). I am recording this interview in (City, State) and I am speaking with (interviewee's full name). This is an interview for *Solos from the Choir: A Boston Black Church Oral History Project*.

Use the Questions as Your Guide

Both the required and optional questions are designed to avoid questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Open-ended questions allow the interviewee to steer the conversation towards what is most important to them.

Using Follow-Up Questions to Go Deeper

While you will be using the list of questions as your guide, be prepared to ask follow-up questions that help bring more clarity, depth and detail to what the interviewee is sharing. The following phrases can be useful in helping people to go deeper.

- Then what happened?
- Can you tell me more about ...
- How did that make you feel?
- What were you thinking about at that moment?
- What do you mean by...

Listen Well

The questions you select will serve as a guide. If the interviewee goes off-topic, it's okay to let them. You can always redirect them back to the question later. The important thing is for them to feel comfortable sharing memories and perspectives that are meaningful to them.

If you are interested in what they are talking about it might be tempting to jump in and share your own stories and perspectives. As much as possible, try to steer the conversation back to them. We find that when an interviewer has a posture of curiosity, openness and being themselves it sets a good tone for the interview.

TIPS FOR LISTENING WELL:

- Don't interrupt. Let someone finish their entire thought before commenting or asking the next question.
- Don't rush the person or cut them off. The space is intended for them to freely express themselves.
- Pause between questions and don't be afraid of silence. In conversation, we sometimes feel uncomfortable if there is a pause in the conversation. Brief pauses in conversation get people to go deeper and think of more things they want to share. Don't be afraid to let there be a few moments of silence between questions.
- Acknowledge when people are sharing something personal or sensitive but don't provide commentary. Often just saying, "thank you for sharing that with me" is enough.

Clarify the Context

Future listeners might not be familiar with specific people and places that the interviewee mentions. Ask them to clarify the details. For example, "who is Elder James?" or "When you say neighborhood, what neighborhood do you mean?"

Be Open & Curious

This is a wonderful chance to learn more about the interviewee and capture their experiences. It should be a fun and rewarding experience for you and them. Be yourself and enjoy the process.

Take a Picture & Gather Materials for Archiving

If you are conducting the interview in person, take a picture with the interviewee.

The interviewee might decide to loan photographs, print materials or other archival materials to the BBCVP team for one week so that we can make copies to be included with their interview in the library at the Institute for the Study of the Black Christian Experience.

Thank the Interviewee

At the end of the interview save a few minutes to tell the interviewee your appreciation for them and their willingness to share their stories with you.

TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING ELDERLY:

These are important to remember for any interview subject, but especially relevant for elders.

- **Schedule the interview at their ideal time of day.** Find out when your interviewee feels most alert and energized and schedule the meeting within that time frame.
- **Pay attention to signs of fatigue.** Participating in an interview takes a lot of energy. The more tired they are, the less your interviewee will be able and willing to remember and articulate details. It's better to shorten the interview if the interviewee seems tired or distracted.
- **Be sensitive to difficulties hearing, speaking and remembering.** Be prepared to repeat yourself. Let the elder set the pace, and be respectful and patient as you listen.
- **Have respect.** This is important to practice both inside and outside the interview space.

SHARING THE INTERVIEW WITH BBCVP

Send All Materials to the BBCVP team

If you use the BBCVP Zoom account to record your interview, the interview will automatically be uploaded to the cloud. If you use a phone or other recording device/ application, you will need to email the audio file.

In addition to audio files, please send the release form and any accompanying pictures to info@blackchurchvitality.com.

If a BBCVP team member needs to pick up archival materials or you borrowed a technology kit, they will schedule a pickup.

Solos from the Choir is an initiative of the Boston Black Church Vitality Project (BBCVP). This Project & Interview Guide was created by the BBCVP with inspiration and frameworks from the following sources:

StoryCorps User Guides. <https://storycorps.org/stories/>

Story Bridges: A Guide to Conducting Intergenerational Oral History Projects by Angela Zusman

For more details about any information appearing in this guide, contact info@blackchurchvitality.com

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Interview Questions

These interview questions are divided into two sections. The first section is 12 required questions that we would like every elder being interviewed to answer. In addition, please choose 4-6 questions from the optional questions or write your own questions.

REQUIRED QUESTIONS

Please ask all 12 of the following questions

- Where did you grow up?
- Who was the first person that brought you to church?
- What church do you attend now?
- How long have you attended this church?
- Can you share your conversion experience or a story about how you came to faith?
- What role has the church played in your life?
- How would you describe your relationship with your pastor?
- What kind of relationship has your church had with the broader Black community over the years?
- In what ways do you observe your church being distinct or similar to other churches?
- What is one of your favorite memories of your church?
- Can you share an important moment that helped shape your identity as a Black person?
- Can you share a story where your faith gave you the courage to speak out against injustice?

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS

Please choose 4-6 questions from the following sections. Check the questions you will ask for easy reference during the interview. Remember to consult with the elder you are interviewing about what they would like to talk about.

Church, Community & Faith

- Have you seen your church go through a major transition or difficult time? How did you all make it through?
- Can you share a story in which you witnessed the church bring restoration and purpose to your life or someone else's?
- How did you imagine God when you were young? How do you imagine God now?
- What is your favorite Bible story? Why?
- What do you look forward to the most about attending church?
- Did you ever have a profound spiritual moment in your life? Can you tell me about it?
- Can you describe a time when your faith was tested and how you overcame the test?
- Can you imagine life outside of a faith community? What would it be like?

Being a Black Christian

- What lessons have you learned being Black and Christian?
- Can you describe a time where you experienced racism? How did you overcome it?
- How has being Black impacted how you read the Bible?

Life Lessons

- What do you feel most grateful for in your life?
- Can you describe one of your happiest memories?
- What are your greatest accomplishments in life?
- What is one biblical warning you wish you had heeded?
- If you had the opportunity to do something over again, what would you redo?

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Interview Release Form

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the Solos from the Choir Oral History Project. This initiative of the Boston Black Church Vitality Project (BBCVP) documents the oral histories of Black senior saints and legacy pastors in Greater Boston to inspire reflection, preserve history and help give insight into assets and resources within churches that enable them to perform effective ministry.

You are being asked to participate because you are an asset to the Black Church and we believe your story can help encourage the faith community to continue the work of ministry to God's people. Throughout the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences as a Black Christian and community member in the Greater Boston Area. Before the interview, you will have the opportunity to preview all of the questions and decide along with the interviewer what you want to talk about. You can expect the interview to last around an hour. Your participation is voluntary and you can choose to stop the interview at any time for any reason.

Your interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and made available for public and scholarly use at the Institute for the Study of the Black Christian experience at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, on the Boston Black Church Vitality website and shared with your church. It may also be used in publications and exhibitions.

We appreciate your participation in this important project. If you have any questions, please ask your interviewer or contact Jaronzie Harris at info@blackchurchvitality.com or 617.262.4567.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep and refer to at any time.

Full Name of Person Interviewed

(print): _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Date of Birth: _____

Name of Interviewer: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Please check all the below boxes and then sign:

- I confirm that I understand that by checking each box I am consenting to participate in the Solos from the Choir Oral History Project
- I confirm that I have read and understood the above information about this project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions that have been answered satisfactorily
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop the interview at any time without giving any reason.
- I understand that this interview is being recorded and the audio file will be transcribed into written text.
- I confirm that I give the Black Church Vitality Project permission to use my name in connection with the written transcript and audio recording of my interview.

Doing so grants the Black Church Vitality Project, permission to the rights of the sound of my voice as recorded on audio or the written transcription without payment or any other consideration. I understand that my interview may be edited, copied, exhibited, published, or distributed, and waive the right to inspect or approve the finished product wherein my likeness appears. Additionally, I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising or related to the use of my image or recording. I also understand that this material may be used in diverse ministry settings.

Signature of Interviewee

Date