

# **Alexander C. Wright Jr.**

## **A Transcription of an Oral Interview**

401 E. Park St.  
Champaign, Illinois  
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Interviewed by  
Patrick Tyler and  
Melinda Roundtree

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## **Introduction**

This interview is with the Rev. Alexander C. Wright Jr., the pastor of the Bethel AME Church. Rev. Wright has been pastor since 1977 and began the ministry at a young age. Rev. Wright is presently a member of the Champaign County Unit 4 School Board. This interview is being conducted on June 24, 1983, at the Bethel AME Church, 401 E. Park, Champaign. The interviewers are Patrick Tyler and Melinda Roundtree, representing the Urbana Free Library Archives Department.

Tyler: Rev. Wright, first we would like to know your background, you know, your life, and to be, well, first to get off to a good start, we would like to know, you know, your childhood, and your life prior to Champaign.

Wright: Well. Born in Chicago, Illinois. My dad was an AME minister and so we did quite a bit of traveling. Basically, I considered LaGrange, Illinois, the place where I was really raised, in terms of we spent the most time there. But I lived in LaGrange, Illinois, I lived a year in southern Illinois, \_\_\_\_\_ in that area, I lived in [Rockville] Illinois, I lived in Chicago. Waukegan. And then, then spent four years at Wilberforce University where I received a bachelor of science degree in mathematics and applied sciences. Wilberforce is the oldest black institution in higher education in the United States, \_\_\_\_\_ school. It was founded in 1856 in Wilberforce, Ohio. Then I spent, oh about, almost three years in the service. I was \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ I was first lieutenant when I got out. And during that period of time, I basically was stationed at Fort \_\_\_\_\_ Fort Sheridan, Chicago.

Then I went into seminary. Got out of the service and I spent three years in the seminary. I went to Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, which is on the Northwestern University campus. During that time I got married. My wife's from North Carolina, \_\_\_\_\_ North Carolina. We have three children, set of twins and \_\_\_\_\_. The oldest son who's 32 \_\_\_\_\_ . Had a church in Burlington, Iowa, which is right on the Mississippi River and is one of the old river towns. And that particular congregation had four generations of members, you know, they could trace their parentage all the way back to the beginning of the church. And then I spent two years in Davenport, Iowa, served a church in Davenport. And then I moved here to Champaign, which I've been here for going on six years.

Tyler: Six years.

Wright: Yes. During that time here, I guess the most notable thing is that I've been on the school board for the past three and a half years. So.

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Tyler: So, we are interested also in what brought you to Champaign.

Wright: Well, I got assigned the church. (Laughter.) It's a church system \_\_\_\_\_ where ministers are assigned the churches. And so they assign once a year. So I just got assigned to this church after I was assigned to the church in Davenport \_\_\_\_\_. And so that was basically what brought me to Champaign.

Tyler: Right. Could you tell us a little bit about your, you know, how you got started in the ministry?

Wright: Well, my first intention, I had not really planned on going into the ministry. As I said before, I took an undergraduate degree in applied sciences and mathematics. So, I, you know, have that. Decided I wanted to go into ministry and I changed courses and applied to the seminary. Seminary for three years. And have a master's of divinity degree.

Roundtree: You said something about your father.

Wright: Ya, my father was AME minister. And that was the reason we moved around quite a bit. And I stayed in quite a, you know, a few different places. And

so by the time I had got to high school I had gone through five different schools, in terms of grade schools, and including, if you count high school, it was about five.

Tyler: Now, you had said, something, where you was talking about that you're a member of the Champaign District 4.

Wright: Ya. Champaign Unit 4 School Board. So I've been there for about three years, a little bit better than three years. It will be three and a half years, four years by the time the elections come around in November.

Tyler: So, can you tell me some of your involvement, you know, on the board? Just like a brief history of since you've been on it.

Wright: Well, there's been so many different things in terms of school board kinds of things. I've been involved with, well, just regular school board business, you know, just taking care of the district in terms of setting certain types of policies and this kind of thing. It's been quite a few, you know, controversies since I've been on in terms of some of the things that the board wanted to do. Redistricting, changing the boundary lines, you know, a busing plan, closing down schools. Getting rid of the superintendent. Hiring a new superintendent. Budget cutting, in terms of cutting back, you know, the budget for this year due to lack of funds, this kind of thing. So it's been quite a variety of things.

Tyler: Would you say that, lately that, the board has been effective as far as, you know, getting things done for the Champaign district?

Wright: Well, I think it's been pretty effective in the sense of trying to deal with the things, you know, with the resources, and trying to spend them as well as possible to get the most use out of them.

Roundtree: Were you influenced a lot by your father when he was a pastor?

Wright: Well, more than likely I probably was. (Laughter.)

Roundtree: What would be your, what \_\_\_\_\_.

Wright: Well, my first choice really wasn't the ministry. I had planned on going into, you see, my major was mathematics and my minor was applied sciences. And I had really planned on going into some kind of business or this kind of thing. So the ministry was not my first choice. So I just switched up some.

Tyler: Would you tell us a little bit about the relationship that Bethel has with the community around this area?

Wright: I think the, well, first thing is Bethel is the oldest black church in the community, so, organized in 1863, or something like that. So it's the oldest black congregation in the community of Champaign. This particular church has quite a history in this community in terms of participation and leadership kinds of things. And so some of the members have been very, well, the older ones, down through the years have really, you know, been involved in community kinds of things, this kind of stuff. I think at the present time, I'm on the school board at Champaign, and then a member of Bethel is on the school board of Urbana, \_\_\_\_\_. And then they I guess members are involved in a lot of different kinds of

organizations and this kind of thing. So it's been very, very, it was very active congregation in terms of community involvement. And I think somebody is doing a paper, a university dissertation, on blacks at the University of Illinois and that history very much had a Bethel AME Church because one of the, you know, members were, you know, very involved on campus and also the church. And that kind of connection because I think prior to this integration in housing and this kind of thing that most of the black students at the University of Illinois had to live in the black community. And so Bethel supplied many of those kinds of places. Also supplied many varied activities in terms of, even had a community park, had a library at one time, had a church band at one time, so there was a lot of activities there by this particular church and congregation down through the years.

Tyler: Well, you just about covered everything I had to ask. I was going to ask other questions.

Wright: Anything else?

Tyler: That's basically, you know, all that we needed.