

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Dr. Jamie Washington

Interviewed by Cana Scott

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Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

Interviewee: Dr. Jamie Washington (DW)

Interviewer: Cana Scott (CS)

Subject: Life of Dr. Jamie Washington

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Cana Scott: I'm Cana Scott interviewing Dr. Jamie Washington through Zoom. Both of us are in Baltimore, Maryland. The time is 5:36 PM. Let's begin. So, from Monday to Sunday, what does a standard week look like for you?

Jamie Washington: There actually is no standard week, but let's see. So, it depends upon the season, right? And when I say, "the season", I live on pretty much an academic calendar, given that 80 or so percent of my work is in the context of higher education. 80, maybe 85 percent. And then, the rest of the work is other corporate, non-profit, government or religious kind of agencies. So, the high season for me is pre-college opening. Very high season.

So, that's anywhere from the second week of August through the middle of September to care for the schools that are in semesters and on quarters. So, I'm busy doing things from the – it starts with preparing leadership, professional staff, faculty, deans cabinets, all of the institutional leadership retreats, through then preparing division leaders, student life, academic affairs, faculty departments – from that, into working with student leaders; from that into working with new students, and that brings us into orientations and those kinds of things. So, that's every season. Then, it slows down after that and then, it gets heavy again from March until the end of – in the spring, it's heavy from March – actually, from February – from Black History Month through Conference Month, which is March, heavily, and beginning of April through the end of April. So, that's the kind of the seasons.

And so, in a typical week, in the heavy season – pre-Covid – I could be in five to six different places in a week depending. Post-Covid, I could be to 8 to 12 different places in a week because it's being done virtually. So, I might start my day and work from kind of 8:00 to 3:00 or 8:00 – if I did a session 8:00 to noon or 8:00 to 3:00 with folks here on the East Coast, but then, could start a session at 4:00 on the East Coast working with folks on the West

Coast to do a 1:00 to 4:00 West Coast time. So, the days got longer during the virtual experience time frame. And so, the typical week can look like doing development, capacity-building work, training, coaching with folks at all levels of the institution, and that's every day.

Different institutions, different organizations, you know, boards, higher-ed adjacent groups, and that's that space. In my pastoral and ministerial space, Sunday is always full with church and post-church activities and events, and then, meetings in the evenings during the week with bible study or spiritual development. Saturdays often filled with national church meetings or local church meetings. So, I try to not work Monday mornings so that I can have that as down time and not start any meetings until Monday afternoon. I prefer not to work Mondays at all, and I try to end my week by noon on Fridays so that I can have space to prepare to move more into my religious and church leader space.

CS: So, you seem to wear a lot of hats so, what would you say is your official job title?

JW: Healer. In all the capacities that I operate in, my outcome is to help heal where there's harm and pain, and help people envision themselves better – themselves, their organizations – better than I found them.

CS: Hm-hmm. So, this is a bit of a pivot, but you mention on Monday mornings, you try not to work. What's something that you do just to relax? Like, play music? Listen to music? What do you do in that down time?

JW: So, down time, for me, looks several ways. So, sometimes, it's just talking on the phone to my sisters, finding time to just be and laugh with them. It's kind of that Monday morning, Friday afternoon space is trying to catch up with some of my besties. That's mostly Friday afternoon kind of time. Every two to three weeks, I try to find myself at Happy Hour with my buddies.

It's harder, because all of us have very full lives, but we do our best not to have us go more than five or six weeks without having gotten together in that way. It's easier to do in the summertime than it is in kind of the regular season. The other thing is is that I really do my best when I'm not taking on extra projects with my ministry to try and let the workday be done by 6:30 or 7:00 at the latest. And so, in that space, then, I'm kind of – in the summer – or when the weather gets nice – I'm just kind of sitting outside,

talking with my neighbors. My partner and I are laughing about trying to figure out what we're gonna do for dinner.

What I'm wanting to – what I've been desiring to get back more into is just taking walks. That got slowed down during Covid and I haven't gotten back in my routine of it yet, but it's in my list of priorities as I move through the end of this semester. I'm a big – I'm a big TV nut so, I love series and so, I'm always looking for either my favorite series or new series to look at on Netflix or on network television. And so, that's kind of how I spend my relaxed, down time.

I'm also a big Audible book listener, too. So, I often will say, "When Audible came out, it just saved my life" because I love what I get from reading, but I hate to read. Reading puts me to sleep – no matter how good it is or what I'm doing. I just – it's an automatic sleeping pill. And so, when I can get what I need or want to read in an audible way, I'm just happy, happy, happy.

I use audible when I drive. I use audible when I would work out. I use audible when I'm just sitting around doing mindless work, trying to clear my e-mail box. Yeah. Listening to a good book.

CS: So, how did you meet your partner?

JW: At church. It was so funny. Funny that you ask that, 'cause where were we? I was somewhere – I think I was watching something on television where that question was just asked last night, and we were looking at each other laughing. We met at church.

Yeah. So, he came to church one Sunday and it was actually the Sunday after Katrina. And I was preaching that Sunday and I preached "The Many Katrinas in our Lives," and we hit it off. Right from there, we started talking, and two years later, we're together.

CS: Did you meet him at Unity Fellowship or –

JW: I did. Yep. Unity Fellowship.

CS: Okay.

JW: Yep. 112 Reed Street. That's where we were – in our formal building.

CS: And you two – you have children together?

JW: Sam had three biological children when we met and so, we – and they were early – late teens, early 20s. So, we have kind of co-parented the children as adults, but have been grandparents to our eight. So, all the grandchildren came along after we got together and then, on my side of the family, there are four nephews. I have no biological children. I have four nephews who are like my sons, and then, I have two adopted sons from church.

And then, between us, we've got 15 grandchildren, with 2 on the way. That'll take us to 17. And my side – so, mines are actually my great-nieces and nephews – the seven on my side – but I'm the patriarch of the family and so, I'm the Pop-pop. So, they're like my grandchildren.

CS: You ever think, like, you'd be a different person had you stayed at your old church?

JW: I'm certain I'd be a different person had I stayed at my old church. Without question! Because my old church did not embrace a progressive theology. And so, my old church, while it was not gay hateful, it was not gay affirming. And I didn't realize the impact of not walking in a spiritually affirming place until I left it.

After I left it, I realized that while I was – while I operated with a degree of power while I was there, it was exponentially different. It is *exponentially* different as I walk in the full knowing of an affirmed – as an affirmed spiritual being. And I don't know that I would have gotten it there. I believe I could go back there now and walk in that power, but I don't know if I could have gotten here in that space.

CS: Would you ever go back just to like, visit for a service?

JW: Oh, I go back all the time. I'm very – oh, very, very close and very connected to the people. Anytime anything's going on or anything happens, yeah, very much still love those folks and still loved by those folks.

CS: So, I know that you are a musician. Do you have a favorite song that you just like to play or just listen to?

JW: There's so many.

CS: It doesn't have to be gospel or anything. It can just be –

JW:

No, no, no. Exactly! Oh, it's funny, 'cause I'm listening to, right now, Billy Porter's *Unprotected*. I'm sure it's in written form, too, but it's on audible, and there's so many similarities in terms of our journeys and stories, but he talks about having gone to see *The Wiz* and that his signature audition song was "Home" – "When I think of home, there's love overflowing." And I didn't realize – it wasn't in my consciousness until he named it that my signature song from high school as well – and that has carried me – that I auditioned and I sing at a lot of things – is also from *The Wiz*, but it's "If You Believe".

And so, both of those, as I think about it, were done by Diana Ross in the movie so – in *The Wiz*. No. In the play, it was done by Stephanie Mills on Broadway so, "If You Believe" and "When I think of Home" – both of those. So, those are – but, for me, "Believe in Yourself/If You Believe" and then, also my motto song – my theme song – is "If I can help somebody as I pass along, then my living shall not be in vain." So, I often open keynote addresses singing that song.

It's a part of my intro. So, folks, as they close the introduction, He lives by the words of his favorite song that was sung at the funeral of the late Mahalia Jackson, "If I could help somebody as I pass along. If I could cheer somebody with a word or song, if I can show somebody that he/she/ze/or they are traveling wrong, then my living shall not be in vain." I added the "Z" and the "they". That wasn't in the original. *[Laughs]*

CS:

Do you have a favorite sermon that you ever preached?

JW:

Oh, that's a good question, Cana! Hmm. I don't know. It's been a lot – *[Laughs]* there's been a lot of them, right? And you know, I think, at times – I think people tell me about "When you preach this message or..." but no, none pops into my head right off the top.

I imagine that if I just kind of pulled some of 'em up, that would click on, "That was a good one. That was an important one." I really do live deeply into the ethic of love so, any time I'm preaching from the context of Corinthians 13 and what love is, those are some of the favorites and powerful messages. But I don't have one that pops into mind as a favorite message. I preached this past Sunday "I gotta tell you something" which was the sharing of the good news of the gospel – that as we move into Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday. So, as we move into when they were celebrating and then, when they crucified, and then, the story of resurrection, that what Jesus was doing was bringing news – letting

folks know about a different way of being and helping to heal, right?

So, I talked about the importance of the gospel being good news and what the church should be doing is sharing good news and not doing harm.

CS: So, for the person that is willing to undergo the journey to unlearn homophobia in the Christian church, what would you recommend for them?

JW: Being gentle with themselves. Be gentle. So, it kind of depends upon the depth – the breadth and depth of that learning. So, sometimes, we learn stuff that – like, "I know this, but I didn't believe it. I didn't take it in. So, it hasn't done me harm."

Does that make sense? So, you can have learned some information and know some stuff, but it's like, "Well, I never believed that. I didn't really take any of that in." But where we've learned it and it actually has gone in and, as a result, left us scarred and wounded and not enough, to unlearn that stuff takes a lot. So, you have to recognize it's a process.

You have to recognize that you can't change faith with facts. So, "I learned this, and I believed it and so, sometimes, even when I find out that what I learned isn't factual, it's not enough to change it, because what I believed wasn't factual, but I believed it. And so, why did I believe it and what's my investment in holding onto that belief?" And so, I recommend that you not try to do it alone – that you get with people who have been in the process and who understand the process. You can't do that with folks who don't understand the process of healing and unlearning, because there are folks who never believed it and they have information that helps you to see how it's not true.

So, they don't understand why you holding on to it no way. They just saying, "Well, that ain't what that really say" or "This is not what that really says" or "That's not really that." So, they show up in an energy that also can be traumatizing, because they make you – you can be made to feel as if there's something wrong with you because you believed that foolishness, right? But someone who has been there – right where you are – and has gone through the process is potentially more equipped to walk with you, move with you on that journey. So, get in community.

Get with someone who's been there. You've got to find out what your pain point is. So, is my pain point the scriptures? Is my pain point my grandmother? It's because my grandmother said it so it's not –'cause sometimes, it's, "Well, if I can find my way through this in the scriptures, then I'm going to be okay."

No. Sometimes it is, "I need Grandmama's approval and so, it don't matter if I find my way, if I read Helminiak's work around *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality* and all of the multiple other spaces where that work has been written. And I've got the facts. It doesn't say what the seven Proverbs scriptures actually have been used to say. I know that. But that's not the place that I'm hung up. I'm hung up in my former pastor's word or my grandmother's word and I need them to say that I'm okay."

And so, if that's the pain place, you have to work the healing of that pain place. Because you might never get them to say you're okay. And will that mean you're never going to be okay? But somebody who understands that has to walk with them through that. That can sometimes happen with therapy, but not always, because sometimes, a therapist isn't grounded enough in the complexity and the nuance – particularly for BIPOC queer folks.

This a whole thing. It's a whole thing. *[Laughs]* When folks say, "Well, you should just *leave* that church" – I often hear that from white gays and queers and white non-religiouses. They said, "Well, why don't you just leave that church?" And there's not a recognition that, for many of us, leaving church is leaving family and leaving community and leaving all that we know, leaving that which has served us, leaving that place where we found joy.

And so, it's not as simple for many of us in those ways, even though the place has also done us harm and continues to do that. It's still not that easy. We know that there are hundreds and thousands of us who are sitting under hateful, harmful, information every week because it's *family*, because it's *familiar*. Sometimes because it's where I met my boyfriend, my girlfriend, 'cause we all in this place. But it's not an affirming place. It's an abusive place.

But we just – folks live with abuse for a long time. For a long time. And if you don't recognize you're being abused, then you're less likely to leave it.

CS: Do you fully believe you are living the life that God intended you to have?

JW: Ooh. Like, that's so good. You're good.

CS: Thank you.

JW: Like, 1,000 percent! And I'm not finished living that. I believe the best is still yet to come. But I am very clear that I am living fully into what God has purposed me to do. I didn't – even as late as when I was heading into seminary and I was determined that I was not going to be the gay poster child – it's like, "I'm not going up, you know? I might write about it in papers or whatever, but I'm not gonna be the one always saying something in class. I'm not doing that."

And God said to me, "Oh, but you are. *[Laughs]* That is exactly what I've sent you there." And I was struggling – I think I might have said this in the first part of our interview – I struggled because I thought, "Well, if I am, all the rest of these folks in here – " it wasn't like it was hundreds of us, but it was five or six of us in the class – "well, they gotta say stuff, too." And God said, "Mm-mm. That ain't their call. It's yours."

So, just because someone is female or just because someone is black or just because someone lives with a disability, that don't mean that it's their call to be the person who knows and speaks on behalf of those populations. If that's the call that I have on their life, then you have to show up as a womanist and as a woman in the ministry and why it matters. But you might – your call might be as a woman – your work is around homelessness, and that's where your energy is. Or around mothers who can't parent children. And so, what I had to realize is just because I had other gay and lesbian siblings in seminary with me, it didn't mean that their work was to set the captives free through the lens of sexual orientation and gender identity. That was my work. And it continues to be my work today.

CS: Do you have a preference between working with youth or working with adults?

JW: I have a preference to work for youth, with adults. Right? So, for me, every day is about the 8-9-10-year old – 14-15-16-year-old child who doesn't have their voice. And my skill set is more in alignment with adult minds and reasoning. I love and support youth and can always be there for youth, but the work that I do to help shift the dynamics – I prefer to be with adults.

CS: If you could talk to your 14-year-old self, what would you say to him?

JW: "Ask that boy out, cause he really wanted to go out with you, and he was waiting for you." [Laughs] I would say, "Don't be so afraid." I would say, "Don't buy the lie." I would say to him, "Jamie, you bought to be told some stuff at this New Pentecostal church you operating in that don't have nothing to do with God. Don't believe it. And love on yourself and love on the people who are around you. Tell the other folks to not believe the lie."

And I would also say to my 14-year-old self, "Help your friends who love you – your het and cis friends – who love you and our community to understand their role in not believing the lie so that they could build the capacity to respond when it was too risky for us to do it."

CS: Do you have any current goals or dreams that you want to accomplish?

JW: I do. In me, there are about four books – at least four books; there may be five or six or seven. So, my life has been such that writing, for me, takes a different kind of energy than speaking. And yet, I feel like there are things that I need to say that must be documented so that it supports the next generation and I leave the planet better. So, I believe there are some stories that no one can tell but *me*. That's uniquely tied to my journey and my experience.

As much I – even as I'm listening to Billy Porter right now, seeing so many similarities in terms of our journey, Billy's story is not Jamie's story. So, not only kind of the memoir writing and story, but also, the book that is going to help young, queer – young and old – young and old queer folks – find their way to healing in Christianity. And so, that's a book. The book that's going to help queer folks who believe they've been called to ministry but have stifled that calling because of the messages they've gotten in particularly BIPOC Christian churches that would have them not be enough or not be of God. So, one of the books that helped me to get there was the *Uncommon Calling* that was – that I read as I found myself being ready – readying myself to answer the call to ministry, and the other one was *Openly Christian and Openly Gay*.

Both of those were books, but those were written by white authors. And that's not to make them wrong or minimize them or anything. They weren't the story of a BIPOC person navigating the journey.

So, writing is one of the things. I also – like, I've always wanted to walk into a room and say, "Hello. I'm Oprah Winfrey!" [Laughs]

And so, I've got a radio or talk show somewhere in me as well. And the last piece that I would say is I am a huge pet person – primarily cats and dogs, but mostly dogs. And so, I have dreams of working in an animal shelter and helping people find the rescue that is going to save their lives and bring them joy. And taking care of those rescue or new puppies until they find a place where they're supposed to go and help people heal. So, it's the mutual healing space for them.

And so, cats and dogs, but mostly dogs. Yeah. The other thing that I figured – like, I will do in retirement – is work in a senior citizen home directing a choir. I want to do a choir of 70 plus year olds. So, doing music with seniors also feels like a dream.

So, to do a concert with all the gray hairs and wheelchairs and walkers and those who had some life experience that bring a different kind of meaning to the songs that they'll sing.

CS: Do you know when you want to retire?

JW: I got about two or three more years in me at this pace. I don't think that I will ever fully. And what does that mean in 2022? What does full retirement look like? So, I can't ever imagine not doing things, not being a contribution. I can't see that for me.

But I do see not having to do things. So, that's what I think about when I think about retirement. I think about not being obligated to do things in order to live or needing to do things in order to live and so on. So, that's – I'm putting in place, making sure that I'm set up so that in three years or so – four at the most – that I can then make choices to work for resources if I want, but not need to do that.

CS: And as a final question, since you doing this is part of a larger queer oral history project in Baltimore, how do you imagine your story being presented – like, the format, the audience, *et cetera*?

JW: Oh, that's good. I don't know. So, let me name Archbishop Carl Bean, who's the founder of our denomination and movement – actually, movement, because he specifically didn't want us to be named a denomination. He is from Baltimore. He is the original writer of "I Was Born This Way" that was later and picked up and adopted by Lady Gaga.

It was his voice many, many years ago in the clubs that reminded particularly young black gay folks that we're not a mistake. And he, from his religious Christian teaching, was progressive, and he knew that God didn't make a mistake and that was the impetus to the song, "I Was Born This Way". And he may transition this year – no – in 2020 – made a transition in 2020, and we did his memorial and funeral service out in Los Angeles, which is where Unity Fellowship was founded and open. But his family is here in Baltimore. He grew up here in the city of Baltimore.

And so, again, I don't remember if I mentioned his name in the first part, but as you name this oral history project here in Baltimore, I could not end that without naming the shoulders that I stand on. And it was actually him to help me to begin. He was a part of the healing. He was one of those who knew what it meant to have been in a space that told you you were not enough as a black queer person. And he knew how to walk with me and hundreds of thousands of others through that healing process.

So, I guess I want to name him and the many black and BIPOC trans and queer folks whose shoulders I stand on, whose names don't get to get called, and who we lost during HIV when our lives – during early days of HIV in the Reagan administration when our lives didn't matter. So, I think that I would want our stories told in multiple ways. So, what I love about *Pose* is it reaches audiences in a way that nothing else has for queer BIPOC trans folks, right? So, I love that big screen. I love theater is another way, and I've been in spaces, seen our stories told in one-person kind of story vignettes and so on and so forth.

That's powerful. I love it. Written, right, in a spread in the *Baltimore Sun* kind of way. And I also like it shared in coffee houses and in little cafes, book stores. Those are all the multiple ways – around a glass of wine or cups of coffee and tea.

So, just anyway it can get told, anyway the story can be shared, I believe that these stories will *heal, save, and change lives* – not just lives of queer BIPOC folks, queer and trans BIPOC folks, but all of our lives. Because in our stories is healing, and a resilience, and moving through struggle. And that's a human experience. I believe that our stories can be a contribution to the healing of the planet in that way.

CS:

Hm-hmm. Thank you.

[End of Audio]