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William White

William Luther White
Illinois Wesleyan University

Daniel Maurer 2012

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Oral History Interview with Bill White
The Ames Library, August 15, 2011

Daniel Maurer: My name is Daniel Maurer. I am a student at Illinois Wesleyan University and the date is August 15th, 2011 and we are—I am doing this interview in one of the study—the group study rooms on the fourth floor. Would you like to state your name and affiliation with Wesleyan?

Bill White: My name…I'm Bill White, or was known here as Chaplain White, Chaplain William Luther White and was at Illinois Wesleyan for thirty-three years from '63 to '96.

Maurer: Wow.

[White laughs]

Maurer: Quite a career.

White: Yeah, long time.

Maurer: Mhmm. So what qualities drew you to Wesleyan?

White: Hm…I guess a couple of things. I was interested in doing something in university chaplaincy and I had been out of graduate school for five years and decided I wanted to do a PhD and specialize in college chaplaincy and there was a job opening here. I was familiar with the town of Bloomington, so I thought it would be a good place to start my career, not knowing it would be where it would end as well! I guess that was the main thing. IWU had the kind of job that I wanted to pursue: they were looking for a chaplain, and there I was.

Maurer: What was Wesleyan like at the time you came here?

White: It was considerably smaller and not as strong academically. It has developed well across the years. It also reminded me a lot of my undergraduate university, DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. So I felt an attraction, I guess, for that size school and that kind of student body profile, so that was the second thing besides there just being an opening for a job.

Maurer: And how—when you came here, how close were you to other faculty and students and how did that change over time?

White: It was more of a family atmosphere in those days and as we went upscale and there was more pressure on the faculty to publish, I think a lot of that intimacy disintegrated actually. Some of us who had been here earlier regretted the loss of that, but it was very much a small, cohesive community in those early days.

Maurer: What do you think contributed to kind of the loss of intimacy?

White: I think kind of primarily the pressure on faculty to publish. That was not quite so emphasized when I came here, but in competition with other schools and of grading the standards all around, that became a part of the process. In the earlier days not only did the president talk about the university as a family, the Wesleyan family, but persons were expected to participate in the community in committees and church groups and so much more. That

volunteerism dropped after a few years, and it was a matter of academic survival. You've probably heard this before.

Maurer: Not yet—kind of but yeah. I mean I've talked with some other people just I've heard over time it's—this university's just transformed—

White: Mhmm.

Maurer: It's just been completely different.

White: Mhmm.

Maurer: Yeah. Are there any students or faculty that stick out to you?

White: Well, certainly there are…[laughs]… Dawn Upshaw and Jack Sikma, for example. And I saw Mark Sheldon as I came through downstairs just now—had all of these folks in class. Of course several students become successful or famous across the years.

Maurer: Interesting. Like what changes have like—other than the Wesleyan intimacy—what other changes have happened over time that you've noticed?

White: Hm…let me see…well, every generation kind of has its own character or personality. In those earlier days, it was more like a summer camp atmosphere and I think the students were not as academically prepared or inclined either. There were lots of good folks and they were going to be good, established citizens in Illinois, but there was not the fierce competition for jobs. Everybody got a job in those days. And so it was more relaxed and comfortable. We used to have—I worked with the Chapel program—the student volunteer committee put together these weekly programs and when I first came there would be two hundred, three hundred in Chapel.

Maurer: Wow.

White: Yeah. We did lots of advertising but also we attracted a lot of regional and national figures and a few international. We could—we had the budget that we could do that and it was a real highlight that I was privileged to work with. And the—with the later sixties, institutions became under suspicion, whether government or universities. The—and that kind—and churches too—that kind of anti-institutional bias made what I was doing much more difficult and the attendances began to decline. Then the age of the late sixties was also very creative. It was probably the most exciting era to be here. It was when it came to doing a Chapel program, for example, that students would create banners, they would write the songs, they expected to produce liturgy themselves. Any weddings that I did in those days the couple would say, "Well we'll write our own vows," and I worked with them in developing those. But just a few years later all of that closed down and students would say, "Well, we'll just use the traditional form," and they didn't want to do much creatively. They were astonished that students had created all of these beautiful banners stored in the Chapel. They couldn't imagine doing such things themselves. So that astonishing change in creativity and motivation is one thing. And a new economic orientation, I guess, came out. Rather than thinking how they could serve society, it was, "How could they earn top dollar?"

[Maurer laughs]

White: And this just permeated the whole curriculum and was another phase…[laughs]…which I think has perhaps declined somewhat. In recent years it seems there is more of a service motivation once again now. But having seen this across thirty-five years or so—I hadn't counted it up, it's thirty-three years—you see that generations develop their own personalities as well as every classroom—they're different. I have at some times had two sections of the same class and, depending upon the people in the class, it could be exciting or it could be sort of difficult to manage. Sometimes just two or three people could change the atmosphere in an astonishing way.

Maurer: Do any memories stick out to you?

White: Well, as far as classroom, I taught the course in "Christianity in the Arts" at one time and did this in various years. At one point I used a book the class really, really loved, and of course I assigned that the next time--two years later--and the class hated the book. How could this happen? This total—the same pages, the same assignments, but it was just a different group and somehow—that was the last time I used that book…[laughs]…trying to be sensitive to various trends and interests and certainly they do change. You can't just assume that what you did previously is going to work again the next time.

Maurer: Did you teach a lot of classes?

White: I taught half time. I did the other chaplain-y things—working with committees and faculty and students and staff and occasionally community members. It was the best job on campus…[laughs]…because I had a real diversity of access to all kinds of people and audiences, but I taught half time. I guess one of the problems was—actually it was about two-thirds time and the chaplaincy was about two-thirds time. Fortunately I'm a very high-energy person but I couldn't recommend that anybody else attempt that. Two thirds and two thirds don't add up to one full-time job. But it was great. It was exciting for all those years.

Maurer: How did your role as Chaplain and kind of a professor impact your life while you were here?

White: Well, I wanted to do the PhD rather than just act as an auxiliary minister. I thought that having the full credentials would lend more respect or attention to the area I was involved in. So I was on various faculty committees and participated in faculty meetings. I was on the personnel committee and the curriculum committee--the leading committees--at various times. Through all the years I think it was a good relationship with the faculty and that I was respected at least, even if coming from a different philosophical base than some others on the faculty.

Maurer: When you were here like how did—you mentioned earlier that the reputation of Wesleyan kind of changed—

White: Mhmm.

Maurer: Would you mind elaborating on that?

White: Well they wanted to move more upscale, probably investing more in faculty salaries and attracting more highly qualified faculty across the years, but also better students. I suppose Jim Ruoti and the Admissions people were responsible for a lot of that; but as they were able to increase the ACT standards and so forth, Admissions became more rigid, restricted, and with

academically better-prepared students, the reputation grew in regional and even somewhat in national circles.

Maurer: Are you familiar with the concept the "bubble effect"?

White: Hm, no, I don't think so.

Maurer: Okay. Among students, the bubble effect refers to how Wesleyan tends to kind of keep to itself—

White: Oh yeah, oh yeah, sure.

Maurer: --in the community. Do you think kind of the change of reputation contributed to that?

White: Hm…oh I don't know, but I think probably all campuses, even the larger ones, are somewhat living in their own world and don't cross the boundaries into community life and find out what's really going on locally. They know it's a temporary situation. They have their own social life and their own work demands and they tend to live in a very isolated, confined area for those brief years. I think that's probably inevitable.

Maurer: Right. While you were here like how did you—you kind of mentioned that—how you saw kind of a change in the mentality of the staff—how like—did you see kind of the other institutions of this university like the fraternity life and ORL, kind of dorm life—how did that—how did you—what—how did that change?

White: I'm not as acquainted with that though I was a member of a fraternity at DePauw University where practically ninety percent of the students belonged to the Greek system.

Maurer: Ninety percent?

White: Yeah, it's very, very high. And, of course, that was not the case here. I think it was around fifty percent much of the time when I was here. So there was less concentration—in the faculty, in the campus in general, on Greek life, I think, than I had experienced in my own undergraduate years. I can't say that it made a lot of difference one way or the other.

Maurer: Like what were the buildings like at the time you were here?

White: I'm sorry?

Maurer: What were the buildings like?

White: Oh, the buildings…less adequate.

[Both laugh]

White: We certainly didn't have whiteboards, powerpoints and all of that. They were okay. There was one, Duration Hall, which I'm sure has a great reputation. The Old Main from ancient years burned down, but they put a roof over the basement and so this ugly thing—

[Maurer laughs]

White: Was in the very center of the campus here for just years and years, and it was a big joke about what—how long the "duration" was. So finally that was demolished from the space in front of Sheean Library now, but it really was an ugly thing that dominated the center of campus for years and years.

Maurer: What do you kind of make of this kind of this—all the buildings that are being constructed right now?

White: I think it's very exciting. It's a beautiful campus, not only the buildings, but also the landscaping. It should be a real attraction to the student that wants to live in such an environment for a while. It's a beautiful bubble.

Maurer: It is a beautiful bubble.

White: And it's good that the school can afford to do these things and, I think, remain competitive with other campuses with similar purposes.

Maurer: While you were here were you ever involved in homecoming?

White: Somewhat.

Maurer: Okay. What did you make of homecoming?

White: Hm.

Maurer: How did you—how were you involved with that?

White: I often came back and would meet former students. That's what I most appreciated, I think. Sometimes those class banquets would invite professors to attend and go to the dances, which I really enjoyed. And I think I was head of the parade one time, probably as I neared retirement, and the homecoming parade, so it was a nice gesture…[laughs]. Campus doesn't do nearly as much of homecoming as DePauw University did. I would like them to see how they bring that off over there: they often have more than half of their graduating classes back, and the alumni homecoming events last four or five days with a lot of academic presentations and that kind of thing. I think as far as that's concerned Wesleyan does have a lot to learn about how to motivate alums and how to encourage their donations too.

Maurer: Homecoming week is really exciting for many people. You have the parades, you have football games, and fireworks too.

White: Ah, yes.

Maurer: Yeah, there's—yeah, a lot of interest in it.

White: Great. I think those are important traditions, great memories—

Maurer: Mhmm.

White: To return to.

Maurer: Right. While you were here how did the gender stratification change over time?

White: The gender?

Maurer: Yeah, like how—like the gender makeup of the university.

White: Hm…I think there were a few more women during the years than there were guys but I don't have any strong memories or feelings about that, so as far as I know it was rather comfortably balanced.

Maurer: Mhmm. And what of the racial diversity here?

White: In the earlier days there were not many blacks, and there were some faculty (some of us, I was interested in this too) concerned about increasing the experience of minority students and other students. We needed to be more aware and sensitive to the various parts of our population. So that was a gradual process as well, I think, and a very important goal for the university to have more diversity.

Maurer: And did you see kind of a development in the amount of international students that came here or that—?

White: Yes. One of my daughters was an international student herself. She studied in Japan for a while. I've travelled the world and I'm just really, really motivated to encourage as much international exposure as possible. That is one of the goals that I heartily approve…[laughs] … because it is one globe out there.

Maurer: Yeah, from what I've heard there's been kind of a greater emphasis on the international students that come here.

White: So a lot of it.

Maurer: A lot of growth with the amount of international students that have come here because during Convocation the president usually announces like—

White: Oh.

Maurer: Like where people have come from.

White: Oh yes.

Maurer: Mhmm and like the amount of people.

White: Mhmm.

Maurer: Over time that has just grown, accelerated.

White: Oh yes, it certainly has.

Maurer: Mhmm.

White: Yeah, there were so very few. And I was noticing on the website recently the international diversification of the faculty.

Maurer: Mhmm.

White: That hardly happened when I began. We may have had one or two from non-United States then, but there are just a lot now from clear around the world.

Maurer: Mhmm, it's really exciting.

White: It is!

Maurer: Yeah, I love—

White: It is.

Maurer: Yeah, the people from other countries.

White: Mhmm.

Maurer: What kind of background did you come from when you—before you came to this university?

White: In terms of academic or social or—oh well I grew up in southern Indiana, a small town, got a good scholarship that actually covered full tuition at DePauw for four years. I would not have been there without it…[laughs]…but that introduced me to a much wider world than my home community of 2,218…[laughs]. My grandparents had been farmers in southern Indiana and I really appreciated my visits to that little old farm, of the kind which has nearly vanished from the landscape now. I appreciated the childhood. There wasn't a lot to do in Paoli, Indiana, so I really concentrated on academic things and goals and piano. My father was a music teacher and band director, so I would practice the piano three or four hours a day. We had no television at that time, of course, which I don't regret…[laughs] But I think that background prepared me very well for the life I wanted to live. I enjoyed DePauw. I graduated from DePauw and Garrett Seminary. Then I was a minister education in Evansville for five years before I went back to Northwestern for PhD work. I wanted to do something professionally and something that would really contribute to the world. I was a product of the Depression and World War II and really hoped to do something that would contribute toward peace.

One of my early ventures was to go to Russia—the Soviet Union in those days—and I also took back various student and citizen groups seven or eight times. I also helped work out an exchange program here in Bloomington/Normal for Russian students. Our Sister City group has been sponsoring a couple of Russian high school students every year for the last fifteen years. It's been interesting to see those students to go back to Russia, or to take jobs with Caterpillar or Microsoft here. I hope that's been some little contribution. Like Dr. Ray Wilson, I visited Hiroshima. I was in Europe not long after World War II and saw the awful devastation there, and that was a very highly motivating factor in my career to try to do something positive, something that would lead to better human relations around the world. It sounds ambitious but, yeah, that's where I came from.

Maurer: Okay. Does Illinois Wesleyan kind of remind you of a small community?

White: Oh yes. Yes it does.

Maurer: So did that kind of make you like teaching here and being a Chaplain here a little easier?

White: I think so. There are familiar faces when you cross the campus. You're not among strangers, you know lots of the people, and they know you. It's a comfortable thing to be in a community where you know and recognize others and kind of understand the rest of the community and how they work. I lived in Chicago for several years while in graduate school at Northwestern University. I might have gone to the Big City, but I feel better here…[laughs].

Maurer: Yeah.

White: More understandable dimensions I think.

Maurer: Mhmm. While you were Chaplain here like what—did you implement any important programs or did you establish any traditions…or help to?

White: I tried to do so, yes. We had a lot of diversity in the Chapel series. There were speakers but we also had musical events, drama events, and tried to incorporate the arts regularly. I think that was one of the things. Since there was no required attendance, Chapel had to be popular enough that people would come, so we worked with the student committee of, oh, a dozen or so, who met faithfully every week—at about ten o'clock at night as I recall. Chaplains tend to develop late sleeping—

[Maurer laughs]

White: Habits…[laughs]…and, anyway, I met with these people. We would spend hours and hours designing this program, which I think tended to be pretty popular. We would often get two, three hundred people unless we had somebody who was really famous. I remember one event at which quite a few people were seated on the floor. We had suddenly run out of seats at Westbrook Auditorium. And so those were exciting times while they lasted. And then, of course, building the Chapel was a part of that. It was an exciting phase. The architecture was not what I would have chosen. It was what President Eckley wanted at the time and I think there are some real flaws in the design, but that's a bygone controversy…[laughs]. And, anyway, it's there. Prior to Evelyn Chapel we had to set up our stage every week. We had an altar that was on wheels—

[Maurer laughs]

White: At Westbrook Auditorium and stored behind the curtains—that we'd have to push out and make it kind of look like a church. It was a mobile thing, very much in transition. During the sixties the students would not have stood for putting money in another building like a Chapel building. Nor would I. It was not something that was a priority for us in the time of poverty and civil rights. But later on, well maybe there ought to be a place--a visible sign of this dimension that was important to IWU for a century. So the Chapel was built with the support of the students and the president and the trustees.

Maurer: Has interest in kind of chaplain affairs and events changed over time?

White: Apparently so. I went to one—I don't often get back to Chapel but I did go to one a couple of years ago that had six people in attendance. And I read in *The Argus* that the editor had gone over for one event and he was the only person there, so, yeah, that compared with the few hundred that we had once upon a time.

Maurer: Mhmm.

White: One other event—I came in '63—I guess the first big event I planned was a memorial service for John F. Kennedy. Our small committee got together and thought, "Well, we ought to do something," and began to sketch out some plans. It pretty soon became clear that everybody on campus was going to be there.

Maurer: Wow…[laughs].

White: All the fraternities and the sororities and all the faculty.

Maurer: Would this about—been around like a thousand people?

White: Probably so. We had to meet in the gymnasium. Plans evolved across a day or so, and it became clear that administration should be involved too—the Dean, the President. And so I developed that memorial service with widespread participation. People were just shocked and stunned that this happened. This young Camelot president—I remember where I was standing near Sherff Hall when I heard the news. People were just paralyzed and wondered about the future and the country and had to somehow articulate all that and move ahead.

Maurer: Mhmm. What do you think has contributed to the loss of interest in chaplain affairs especially in kind of the nineties and the eighties—

White: Mhmm.

Maurer: Time?

White: I think it is no longer supported from the top. At one point the administration was visible in the front row--the President and the Dean of the university were there. It was "the thing to do" to go to Chapel, to talk about Chapel presentations over lunch. And then, of course, if the faculty and administration turns out, the students say, "Oh well, maybe we ought to check this out. This seems worthwhile or significant." So there was that atmosphere that it's okay…[laughs]…or even desirable to participate in this dimension, so I think a lot has to do with the attitude of the administration. I don't know if we should get into names but I never sensed any support from Minor Myers other than token interest. He really did not know what was going on although I gave him regular written reports and annual reports. He was—a few years after I was here—he was stunned to discover that students had something to do with the planning of Chapel. Well, as I said, we spent hours on this, we had a very good representative committee and good relations with the student senate. Dr. Myers had his own pressures, I'm sure, financially and academic too. But Chapel wasn't an important thing for him. Some others really struggled to make it more important, but in the long-term it kind of collapsed from the top. And the attitude about religion in America changed too. It became more divisive: the nuts, freaks got the media attention, and so the attitude was that this was not something really interesting and respected anymore.

Maurer: Is there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude this interview?

White: Hm…can't think of anything at the moment. I thank you for your questions and I'm available if you want to pursue any of this further. There should be, in the Archives, a rather elaborate summary of some of the Chapel programs through the years. I usually did a trip over to

the Archives each Spring with a folder of materials. I haven't been back to check it out, but I assume those are still resting

Maurer: Mhmm.

White: somewhere. I think it's important to leave historical record and all of the effort that went into that program at one time. But, anyway, thank you Dan.

Maurer: Mhmm. Thank you so much for coming in to talk.

White: Okay.