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## Interview with Karl Mattson, August 17, 2011

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## Interview with Karl Mattson, August 17, 2011

### Description

Karl Mattson was interviewed on August 17, 2011 by Michael Birkner about his life and professional experiences and his connections with Gettysburg College.

**Length of Interview:** 94 minutes

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### Keywords

gettysburg college, gettysburg, service learning, chaplain

### Disciplines

Higher Education | Liberal Studies | Oral History

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #2 with former College Chaplain, and former Director of the Center for Public Service, Karl Mattson**

**MICHAEL BIRKNER:** This is August the 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011. I'm Michael Birkner, sitting in the Harner Room in Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, for the second interview with Karl Mattson about his life and professional experiences and his connections with Gettysburg College. We've been moving along and we've got Karl and Marge into the early 1960's having moved around a lot, now in Brooklyn, New York. We're picking up on a thread from the last conversation in which Karl alluded to awakenings that were happening in the 1960's. So Karl, say something about that.

**KARL MATTSON:** Well, the way you put that changed the context a little bit. I mean it was a time of awakening among young people particularly I think. New York was a good place to be when that was happening. For example, as I mentioned before we ran large summer programs for neighborhood youth. We brought in students who had gotten the bug to work in the inner city and help the world by dealing with impoverished and underprivileged kids; so that was part of the equation. What I think the largest part for both Marge and I were, we come from rather predictable and standard Midwestern, and for a while, western New York upbringing, and suddenly we were at the busiest intersection of New York City. And we knew something about the world, but we didn't know very much about the world, and the intensity of life there we found immensely stimulating. I have a good friend who writes nature stories. She spends months by herself in the woods observing these groups of coyotes or something, but then to write she moves to New York City where she produces her work. That kind of spirit was around, plus the task that we had was to relate the Swedish Mother Church of Brooklyn to what was chiefly a

Puerto Rican and black neighborhood, but we enjoyed that, so that. Anyway, there were kids everywhere--

**BIRKNER:** How would you describe the neighborhood of the church aside from the ethnicity? Was it a neighborhood where people kept up their dwellings? I assume there were a lot of apartments, but maybe there were some triplexes or duplexes.

**MATTSON:** There were tenements.

**BIRKNER:** Tenements. Did it have a run-down look?

**MATTSON:** It had a very run-down look.

**BIRKNER:** You mentioned about the business of Marge being concerned being out in the street.

**MATTSON:** People lived in small apartments. I mean, kids had rat bites frequently; everybody kept steel wool in their apartment to clean the dry walls.

**BIRKNER:** So you were not in Bedford Stuyvesant, but you were also not in the Upper West Side of New York either. You were sort of on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, but not absent optimism.

**MATTSON:** It was gypsy communities, we had a lot of gypsy store fronts . . . ; well, some of it dealt with prostitution, some of it dealt with fortune telling.

**BIRKNER:** Sounds like a fairly rough neighborhood, Karl.

**MATTSON:** It's less rough now, but it was rough, yeah.

**BIRKNER:** And yet you give me the impression that aside from that initial concern of safety, that you and your family thrived in the neighborhood. Is that an overstatement?

**MATTSON:** Well, no, it's not an overstatement. We thrived and what becomes important to us, at least in measure for the rest of our lives, is somehow crystallized by the experience that we had there.

**BIRKNER:** Alright, that's important, and that's really part of where I was going with the original question about awakenings. I mean, this after Jimmy Carter loses his governor election in 1966, he's pretty depressed and in this case he goes for some walks with his sister who's an evangelical preacher, and he has his awakening through a different channel; he's born again. Your experience in New York City would affect, reorient you in terms of your vocation.

**MATTSON:** It would provide a focus for what I did subsequently.

**BIRKNER:** You knew what you wanted now.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, I was good at that. I liked life on the street; I loved messing around with the people on the street.

**BIRKNER:** What about the teenagers? How'd you get along with them? Teenagers are notoriously hard to deal with.

**MATTSON:** It was interesting because there was still a white teenage group in the church, and there were frequent tensions with the white teenage group as we dealt with multiracial situations.

**BIRKNER:** Between the whites and the Puerto Ricans you mean?

**MATTSON:** And they would often question my commitment to their side of the fence.

**BIRKNER:** So you simply were straight with them about where you came from, right?

**MATTSON:** Right, yeah.

**BIRKNER:** What did the hierarchy think of what you were doing?

**MATTSON:** Well, the hierarchy liked it. This was the sixties. Everybody knew we had to adapt to a changing world. This was an opportunity of New York to do that, and so they were very curious and interested. I would speak frequently about it.

**BIRKNER:** You spoke at other parishes or you spoke at other churches and church meetings, and so forth?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Parishes.

**BIRKNER:** So they were aware of what was going on in your parish and, I realize this was a long time ago, but roughly what was the size of the parish when you were in Brooklyn?

**MATTSON:** It was about, oh, when I got there, about 500.

**BIRKNER:** I would consider that pretty large.

**MATTSON:** But it was on the decline. It had been fifteen, sixteen hundred at one time.

**BIRKNER:** I'm reminded of an interview I did some years ago with Carey Moore about his experience in a congregation in Baltimore in the 1950s. It had been a very strong congregation that was on the decline, and I suspect ultimately terminal decline, the whites simply fled Baltimore for the suburbs.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, that phenomenon is common. I've been in it several times. Whites make a valiant effort to hang in there because a certain significant proportion of the congregation that knows that this is the Lord's work [laughter] you know? And they don't do it because they really are that committed to living in mixed neighborhoods, but they do it because they think it's the right thing to do. But that lasts for a time; not forever.

**BIRKNER:** Yeah, and when people have this conversation with you, and they must have had it, about the tension between raising their kids in a safe environment, or simply feeling safe

themselves or comfortable, and their sense of the Lord's work, how did you talk to them, how did you respond to that?

**MATTSON:** Well, I would listen, chiefly, but I would also use predictable Biblical quotes to help justify this action, I would preach on that.

**BIRKNER:** In other words you didn't tell them what you thought they should do, but you gave them the context for their own thinking.

**MATTSON:** Well, they knew we had to open the church to the neighborhood young people and the neighborhood people. So we talked about that a lot.

**BIRKNER:** What was your interaction with city officials?

**MATTSON:** Well, there're many local officials.

**BIRKNER:** So local Brooklyn people, I guess assembly men and city council type people, right?

**MATTSON:** And development agency people in the neighborhood.

**BIRKNER:** Now that was a period of expansion as well, was it not? People were coming up with more projects, and there was a lot of poverty money flowing in the system.

**MATTSON:** We got several ministries going with poverty funding, about a fifth of South Brooklyn and, in cooperation with several other churches, about a fifth of summer poverty funding.

**BIRKNER:** Were they successful?

**MATTSON:** That's hard to say. Yes, they were successful in that they provided a good place for kids to go in the summer, and by and large the activities were worthwhile.

**BIRKNER:** Did any notable African American Civil Rights leaders ever come in to your neighborhood during the time you were there?

**MATTSON:** No.

**BIRKNER:** They were busy with the South and other places; Memphis and so forth. So how long were you in —?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I was just there four years.

**BIRKNER:** Four years, that's what I thought. And what, was it Chicago that drew you next?

**MATTSON:** No, then my life becomes more complex. The line I usually use is, I was good at what I did in Brooklyn and I was quite comfortable doing it, not comfortable, but [we] became very streetwise. I mean we sponsored street theatre, like the famous Paper Bag Players who would appear regularly on the street by the church and hundreds of kids would come. . . . It all went very well but then as I have often said, I cashed in my inner city checks on a fat-cat job in midtown Manhattan.

**BIRKNER:** Were you doing some kind of hands on physical labor work?

**MATTSON:** Eventually. I went to St. Peter's. You know St. Peter's on Lexington and 53<sup>rd</sup>?

**BIRKNER:** Well, that sounds like a fancier neighborhood.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, it was a Lutheran church, the most fancy Lutheran church in New York City. Eventually Citicorp bought the church and now St. Peter's is in the basement of the Citicorp building.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter]

**MATTSON:** But I was called the Director of Theological Education. I was never quite sure what that actually meant, but my job, based on what was happening in the sixties both theologically and socially, was to interject those energies into that particular parish, which of course was controversial. Many Sundays after church the church council would meet and there would be minor heresy trials for what I had been doing in the past week.

**BIRKNER:** I'm just curious, did the decision to go to St. Peter's emanate from your desire for a new challenge or did someone put this in front of you and say this would be good for you to do?

**MATTSON:** Well, the pastor of St. Peter's, I had known him previously.

**BIRKNER:** So he talked to you about it?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, he thought it would be good.

**BIRKNER:** And what did it mean for your living arrangements? Did they provide you with housing?

**MATTSON:** No, then I shifted houses in Brooklyn. We bought an old brownstone in Park Slope and lived there.

**BIRKNER:** Was that pre-gentrification?

**MATTSON:** That was, the reason we could afford to live in Park Slope was because the blacks there had just hit the Slope, you know the Slope?

**BIRKNER:** I just know about it, read about it.

**MATTSON:** We were only a couple blocks down from Prospect Park. The pricing depended upon the proximity to Prospect Park, and the blacks were just moving in to some parts of the Slope, which meant that the brownstone that now sells for about three and a half million, you could pick up for 25,000 bucks.

**BIRKNER:** Can you imagine.

**MATTSON:** I bought a brownstone which is in the Architect's Guide to New York City, never touched, four stories, different wood on every floor, for 25,000 bucks.

**BIRKNER:** Isn't that amazing? And you lived in that with how many kids?

**MATTSON:** By that time we had the three kids.

**BIRKNER:** You had the three kids, right. And, so you took the subway uptown.

**MATTSON:** I rode the subway uptown.

**BIRKNER:** It'd be at least 45 minutes from there to get into midtown.

**MATTSON:** It'd take an hour, maybe.

**BIRKNER:** But it was in the city and it's still a twenty cent, or fifteen cent subway ride.

**MATTSON:** I think it cost that much, yeah.

**BIRKNER:** I think it was fifteen cents for a subway ride. That's about when I was starting to ride the subway. What year –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] this was '68. '69 maybe, I get mixed up.

**BIRKNER:** Now, I thought you had gone to Brooklyn a little earlier so...

**MATTSON:** I went to Brooklyn in '64.

**BIRKNER:** That makes sense. OK. I can see, that's when a lot is breaking out in Brooklyn.

Ocean Hill-Brownsville, for example, is a big controversy during the Lindsay years.

**MATTSON:** [John] Lindsay was the mayor. We had a great amount of optimism about him when he first came to office, but that quickly eroded because of his inability to govern. . . .

**BIRKNER:** So did you feel good about what you were doing in St. Peter's?

**MATTSON:** No, it was a total mismatch. Well some of the stuff was fun. We had a big display of Claus Oldenberg's anti-war stuff in the church parlor. We'd have someone like Malcolm Boyd come in and lecture on Jesus. We had him in for Good Friday one year. He sat on a stool in the front of this old mini gothic cathedral in midtown and talked about Jesus' penis. [laughter] And all the old German ladies who come to church to cry over Jesus on Good Friday, they all ran out crying. The last play I put together, we started this thing called Theatre at Noon, which provided lunchtime theatre and other kinds of performance for that part of Manhattan which was

largely communications industry, and the last play we put together was called “Mother Trucker’s Campaign” which caused some problems.

**BIRKNER:** Why was that?

**MATTSON:** Just the title.

**BIRKNER:** Because of the play on words? Yeah, okay,

**MATTSON:** Yeah, and the theatre itself, often it began as theatre; it was not a bad idea.

**BIRKNER:** But, it was not a fit.

**MATTSON:** Not a fit. The church was excited. That was when John Gensel, you ever hear of him? He was the most famous jazz minister in New York City.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] why don’t you spell his last name for us.

**MATTSON:** G-E-N-S-E-L. He was a Puerto Rican and all the big jazz names were in St. Peter’s. The evening service on Sundays was jazz service. It was a place where things were happening.

**BIRKNER:** And, how long did you stay in St. Peter’s?

**MATTSON:** Briefly, only a year and a half.

**BIRKNER:** A year and a half. And then what happened?

**MATTSON:** Then I went and worked construction.

**BIRKNER:** That’s what I was thinking, okay. How did that happen? I mean, that’s quite a transition. You could obviously have gotten another church if you had pressed for one.

**MATTSON:** Well, maybe. I wasn’t really ready to go into a church at that point.

**BIRKNER:** Well what did Marge have to say about this?

**MATTSON:** Well, we just bought this brownstone, we had bills to pay, and I came home one day and said “I’m not going back to that place,” and I didn’t.

**BIRKNER:** I'm, I admit, somewhat lacking in knowledge about how one goes and gets a job in heavy construction having been a Lutheran minister.

**MATTSON:** I had done a lot of construction before early on so I had some skills.

**BIRKNER:** So you could prove to whomever was hiring that you could do it?

**MATTSON:** Well, it was more I knew someone. I had worked for Thor Heyerdahl's navigator.

**BIRKNER:** The famous Thor Heyerdahl? "Kon-Tiki" Thor Heyerdahl?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, his navigator was this guy by the name of Norman Baker who I worked for who did specialty concrete construction in New York City.

**BIRKNER:** How did you know Baker?

**MATTSON:** He knew a friend of mine from church.

**BIRKNER:** And so, through the connection you talked to him about possibly going to work for him?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, and he hired me. I was a curiosity.

**BIRKNER:** Well, you were also a pretty strong young brawny guy, right, so he probably thought you could do the job. So were you pouring concrete or were you doing other things?

**MATTSON:** Well, much of the work was pumping cement. There are trucks that you pump concrete up long tubes into places you can't otherwise reach. You pumped cement under 400 pounds of pressure and I once disconnected the line to Kennedy Airport when I thought the pressure was turned off, and it wasn't, so I blew concrete all over the international terminal. We were weeks cleaning that up.

**BIRKNER:** Oh my goodness.

**MATTSON:** We hollowed out buildings on Washington Square to make more apartments [inaudible].

**BIRNER:** What did you think of this work?

**MATTSON:** My family insists that I was the easiest to live with I'd ever been.

**BIRKNER:** You came home at night tired probably ready to eat dinner [laughter].

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] and fell asleep right as I sat.

**BIRKNER:** Say a word at this point about how you're interfacing with New York. Is it mostly a matter of taking your kids to the parks or do you actually get them introduced to some of the museums and other culture of New York? What's memorable as far as the New York experience for you as a family man?

**MATTSON:** Well, the first thing that comes to mind is back in the parish I would make hospital calls on Sunday afternoons with the kids. We'd put the kids on the subway and the hospitals were all over New York. We traveled around, visit, and then would go see something or stop at a delicatessen or something. Kids like that.

**BIRKNER:** So that was kind of, being around and moving about the city was –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I know New York well. I know midtown well and I don't know the Bronx at all but I know Brooklyn well. I drove dump trucks for some of that time, dumping big loads onto the barges in the East River.

**BIRKNER:** On the barges. [laughter] And you did that for how long?

**MATTSON:** Well, I have to put this all together again. I think it was full time and part time for probably three years, but then I was hired to become half-time chaplain at New York University, so I did both jobs at the same time. And then I had for some years worked for Bill Webber at East Harlem Protestant Parish, you know who he is?

**BIRKNER:** No.

**MATTSON:** Well, he was the first of the large institutional ministries in Harlem in which white people were involved. Among other things he had a program [through which] students from all over the country came to New York and lived on the Lower East Side. I provided experiences for them, helped them to get jobs and provided experiences for them in the city.

**BIRKNER:** How did you get those two particular positions? Did you know somebody that knew somebody, or how did that work? How did you wind up with the Chaplain job?

**MATTSON:** With the Chaplain job? I think I applied for it. I knew people.

**BIRKNER:** Clearly, and that would have been in the early 1970's that you would do the Chaplain job?

**MATTSON:** NYU was closed down a good part of that time. It was really a rough time on Washington Square.

**BIRKNER:** When you say closed down, you mean because of the protests?

**MATTSON:** The students protested the government involvement in certain departments at NYU and closed the school.

**BIRKNER:** NYU reached its low point around that time and then it began its long ascendance.

**MATTSON:** Instead of an assistant chaplain we had a nurse on duty to deal with the hurts that the students were getting in various fights. This was a time when the construction workers, during the Vietnam War, and the students, were fighting all the time.

**BIRKNER:** That's what it was famous for. Now the ministry in Harlem, that was after NYU or at the same time?

**MATTSON:** Same time. I worked a number of jobs to put it all together.

**BIRKNER:** And you were still making some decent money doing construction. Sounds like a pretty busy time in your life, but also interesting because of the different realms you were operating in.

**MATTSON:** And the other thing that was largely at that time unfolding, we lived on the Slope, and both my wife and I would agree that that was the finest community we ever lived in. There were young folks like ourselves with young children that lived on a short block of the Slope, and we had exceptionally fine neighborhood experiences. We took down fences between the brownstones in the backyards; kids ran wherever they wanted. We'd go to demonstrations together, you know, all the sixties things, and walk home safety patrols for the neighborhood.

**BIRKNER:** So it must have been tough when in the end you sold that property.

**MATTSON:** Our marriage has been pretty solid most of the fifty four years we've been together. If anything ever threatened our marriage it was moving Marge out of Brooklyn because she just liked it there.

**BIRKNER:** Was she doing some teaching when she lived in Brooklyn?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, she taught, yeah. She never taught full time in Brooklyn, but she taught as a substitute, but she taught most of the time; in John Jay High School if you know it.

**BIRKNER:** I don't know it, no. Is that in Brooklyn?

**MATTSON:** Uh huh.

**BIRKNER:** It's interesting because the best time of your life coincided with some of the worst times for the city of New York. You've got all these clashes between protesters and construction trades, the inevitable conflict of the Vietnam War, you've got the city's economic decline. Remember Felix Rohatyn and the financial review board? And "Ford to city: Drop dead." the famous headline in the New York Daily News, when Ford refused to guarantee a loan to the city,

etcetera, etcetera. These were tough times in New York. The subways were full of graffiti, crime was up. It was kind of a grungy time for New York, and yet you were at your peak.

**MATTSON:** I don't know if I was at my peak, but I was sure learning a hell of a lot you know.

**BIRKNER:** Street-smart stuff.

**MATTSON:** Yeah.

**BIRKNER:** I mean, you already knew the theology you needed to know.

**MATTSON:** My theology remains relatively constant. Well, I'm a Jesus person; I'm not a hierarchy person. That remains relatively constant.

**BIRKNER:** Now, given what you were doing and given your family seems to be in a good place, admittedly you were jumping from thing to thing during the day, why leave?

**MATTSON:** Well, I tell a story about that but I don't know if it's true [laughter].

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] Nobody's ever put it quite that way on tape to me. Go ahead.

**MATTSON:** You make up these little stories based on facts that tend to become myths –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] We create our own little narratives.

**MATTSON:** Historians do it.

**BIRKNER:** Yes, absolutely. Well, tell it the way you best told it.

**MATTSON:** The other thing I didn't mention to you, I went back to get a master's degree in anthropology at NYU.

**BIRKNER:** No, you didn't mention that.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, I never did get the degree because I didn't finish my paper, but I passed all of the exams for it, but the degree was not important to me. But I had become skeptical about the role of clergy in the kind of society that you just described to me in New York City. I mean, what's this all about? I was cynical about my own function in certain ways. It's one of the

reasons I left, I couldn't, probably as I also mentioned to you, I was raised in this, you know, ministerial tradition and probably I didn't have the psychological freedom to leave it, and probably these years of mucking around New York City were a time when I experimented leaving it, and for a time I thought I would. I started out as a political science major at college but sort of went back to anthropology, but reading about witches and sorcerers and other religious functionaries in the African community I began to reflect, this is the story I told, that ministers do have a role to play, and at least philosophically, that cleared some hurdles. Secondly I feel I was just getting tired of piecing my life together. I was exhausted, but exhilarated.

**BIRKNER:** I understand. You can do certain things, even things that are positive in your life only for a limited time because you wear out in some ways.

**MATTSON:** I'm not able to describe it to you well but what sustained us there were our relationships. We just had, oh God, beautiful friends.

**BIRKNER:** What you said is, if I understand you, it sustained you, is what the word you used?

**MATTSON:** Well, the relationships, and the experiences.

**BIRKNER:** So you're working, it seems to me, again with a certain level of ambivalence because there are certain things that are really good, and yet there's a sense that you've got to get out of the city at the same time, so is Chicago the next step?

**MATTSON:** Mm Hm.

**BIRKNER:** And how did that happen?

**MATTSON:** Well, I began to look around to see what was available in the church and that sort of thing. I had broken my foot at Harlem Hospital doing construction up there so several of the interviews I had, I looked pretty disabled and didn't get much of a hearing, but Salem Church of

Chicago which was a very famous church because they didn't cut out and run when black people moved south in 1949, was a very important black church, with something like twelve or thirteen hundred black people who joined the church because of its courage. And after the president of the synod heard I was available for a call, he recommended me, and I went.

**BIRKNER:** I'm not quite clear on this. You said two, three different things. Did you say that this church moved?

**MATTSON:** No, in the late 1940's black people began to move south of 63<sup>rd</sup> street.

**BIRKNER:** Okay, black people were moving, not the church.

**MATTSON:** And eventually they moved into the neighborhood. The neighborhood was 74<sup>th</sup> and Calumet. There'd been major riots just a few blocks away when black people first moved in. And that too was the Swedish mother church on the south side of Chicago.

**BIRKNER:** And when you interviewed for the job there or were first getting there, what was the ratio of whites to non-whites in that church?

**MATTSON:** There were maybe twenty whites left.

**BIRKNER:** Oh, so it was primarily a black church?

**MATTSON:** Twenty active whites, there may have been more.

**BIRKNER:** And how many blacks would you say there were if there were twenty whites, I mean, was it a big church?

**MATTSON:** Twelve hundred.

**BIRKNER:** Twelve hundred? That's a large church. And, how many staff would you have in a church that size?

**MATTSON:** Well, briefly I had an intern from the Seminary.

**BIRKNER:** You didn't have an assistant pastor? You must have done a lot of funerals and weddings. [laughter].

**MATTSON:** Well, it was a fairly young congregation, so a lot more weddings than funerals. In Brooklyn I did funerals; in Chicago I did weddings.

**BIRKNER:** Very interesting. Weddings are better, I'm sure.

**MATTSON:** Weddings are high drama.

**BIRKNER:** Yeah, I guess they are because sometimes you can sense that it isn't gonna work.

**MATTSON:** Yeah and you—well, anyway.

**BIRKNER:** Families, etcetera, etcetera. Alright, so it does sound like you must have had some tense conversations at home when the call came from Chicago. Marge would not have been enthusiastic about this call.

**MATTSON:** She didn't mind the fact that we were moving into a black neighborhood.

**BIRKNER:** No, but I'm talking about moving.

**MATTSON:** But she minded the fact that we were moving because our idea of what it means to live communally with other people was [botched up].

**BIRKNER:** And what would your living arrangements be in Chicago?

**MATTSON:** In a parsonage attached to the church.

**BIRKNER:** So at least you didn't have to go out and hunt for an apartment in Chicago, you had a place and was it a single family house?

**MATTSON:** Yes.

**BIRKNER:** Describe the neighborhood.

**MATTSON:** Well actually it sounds more dramatic than it actually was. This had been a Swedish part of Chicago originally, that's why Salem Lutheran Church was there. By and large

they were two family homes. They were two family duplex kinds of things, or single family homes.

**BIRKNER:** Was it a vibrant street life or was it a calm street?

**MATTSON:** No, the street was pretty quiet.

**BIRKNER:** And did they have shops handy and so forth?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, on the avenues. Every so many blocks there'd be a business

**BIRKNER:** So what was the best thing as far as you were concerned, aside from being employed full time in something that was your vocation, what was the best thing about going to Chicago?

**MATTSON:** The best thing was the kind of privileged communication with black people about where they come from and who they were. The best thing to do at Salem was not to do less, but just to sit quietly and listen if you wanted to learn. A lot of Pullman porters, for example, they had wonderful stories, well, there were these stories about throwing out copies of the Chicago Defender along the tracks of the old Illinois Central saying "come north" where there is at least a measure of justice and freedom.

**BIRKNER:** Nicholas Lemann wrote a nice book about that. Let me ask you this; given the nature of the times would there not have been resistance in an overwhelmingly African American congregation to having a white guy, a Swedish white guy no-less, come into the congregation as the pastor?

**MATTSON:** I'm just beginning a project that deals with that question. I never experienced that resistance. There'd be a lot of joking about "head nigger in charge" from the church council people. I never experienced any of that, although my wife experienced more than I did. We were

unacquainted with a lot of black customs, and dressing for church is one of them. Everybody would wear a hat to church and wear your best dress; you'd put forward your finest.

**BIRKNER:** That had been true for a long time, right?

**MATTSON:** And the first day we were there my wife wore a pantsuit to communion, which offended the ladies in the church. It took them several years to get over that. She had no idea that a pant-suit was unacceptable, so we had that kind of trouble. But I was good with the teenagers. We had a remarkably fine teenage group and that's where I began to get into service learning, carrying black kids into Greene County in Alabama – the first county in the Black Belt to elect an all-black administration – and other counties investigating what was happening in the South and doing service learning.

**BIRKNER:** And, Greene County in what state?

**MATTSON:** Greene County is the next one over from Selma [Alabama].

**BIRKNER:** So it's in Alabama, in the black belt.

**MATTSON:** It's the first county in the black belt that elected an all-black administration, and we went down there just after the election.

**BIRKNER:** I didn't realize you had done that that early on.

**MATTSON:** It was '70, probably '72.

**BIRKNER:** That's when blacks were starting to get elected to office. Just like the fellow you and I interviewed in Lowndes County, John, now I'm blanking on his last name, but he was the first county sheriff elected right, in Lowndes County; we interviewed him when we were down there.

**MATTSON:** His name has slipped from my head. [overlapping] it was just so long ago.

**BIRKNER:** He gave us an interesting interview. So go ahead about the Chicago experience; the things that stick out.

**MATTSON:** Well, I don't know what sticks out. I started to relate to Operation PUSH a little bit. I got involved a little bit with Operation PUSH. We had a demonstration that closed down the markets along the Dan Ryan Expressway because of their treatment of black people, they were owned by white merchants. The people of the congregation didn't like that much because they were a little suspicious of Jesse Jackson; these were awkwardly mobile black people.

**BIRKNER:** They thought he might be doing this for his own political purposes?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, there was kind of a class thing there too, that is, the educational level of our congregation was immensely high. There were 80 teachers, several judges, doctors, and lawyers.

**BIRKNER:** So it was a mixed congregation with an ample doses of professional people. What ostensibly was PUSH meant to do? It wasn't simply to call out injustice, was it? Was it supposed to provide programming for kids who were at risk or anything like that?

**MATTSON:** I can't describe the full program of PUSH. I would go to their Saturday morning meetings on occasion, get involved with specific actions.

**BIRKNER:** Was there any particular character who stood out?

**MATTSON:** Jesse Jackson.

**BIRKNER:** Well ,what'd you think of him?

**MATTSON:** I was impressed.

**BIRKNER:** He was always a great talker wasn't he? And in his own way charismatic. Alright, so what did your kids think of living in Chicago and living in a parsonage in a black neighborhood?

**MATTSON:** I think it was, again, much harder on my family than it was on me. I was deeply involved in this and that. Life was good. But Kristen, my middle girl, was the only white in her elementary school. Eventually the school saw that it was unfit for her, so we moved her into a school that was maybe 60% black and then 40% white. My wife eventually taught at a school in Woodlawn called Harvard St. George which had a mix of community kids and university people, which was a good environment for the kids, they ended up at that school.

**BIRKNER:** And so you spent several years at Harvard St. George?

**MATTSON:** Harvard St. George.

**BIRKNER:** Is that a private school or a public school?

**MATTSON:** It's a private school. Walt Frazier's kid went there, if that interests you.

**BIRKNER:** I thought Walt Frazier played for the [New York] Knicks?

**MATTSON:** He did, but he had a wife in Chicago [laughter].

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] He probably had a wife somewhere else, too. Back to the city--.

**MATTSON:** Actually the experiences in Chicago were not all that dramatic. The congregation was large so all of my time was just doing what a priest does in St. Francis [in Gettysburg].

**BIRKNER:** Preparing your sermons and dealing with the day to day needs of the congregation, and providing, I guess the ear to hear people out when they wanted to just express themselves, right? You would do that.

**MATTSON:** There were stories to tell for example, I took, I took, as I said we had an extremely fine youth group in the congregation and I took the youth group down into Mayor [Richard J.] Daley's neighborhood at the invitation of a local pastor. I was unaware that black people were not welcome in that neighborhood, and within an hour they came at us with, it was a

gang of people carrying pool cues and we had to be barricaded in the church until the local police dispersed the attackers.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] What was wrong with the local pastor that he didn't understand that?

**MATTSON:** I don't know.

**BIRKNER:** You weren't gonna walk across that expressway, and I was always under the impression that that was quite deliberate on Daley's part.

**MATTSON:** We were in a tough part. You know, Robert Taylor homes were just three blocks away.

But we had a lot of people who, social workers, and you didn't go in Robert Taylor homes after dark.

**BIRKNER:** I would imagine, and of course, it wasn't too long before you couldn't get an elevator up either. It was just very rough there. So you're living a very proactive life. You're saying that you're immersed in it. Sounds like it's pretty good, that you have day-to-day issues, and you can financially support your family in that job.

**MATTSON:** The pay was pretty good.

**BIRKNER:** So did you expect that you would stay longer, or did you have this typical four-year itch?

**MATTSON:** In this case it was a seven-year itch. I was there seven years.

**BIRKNER:** So what year did you go to Chicago? I want to be clear on this.

**MATTSON:** I was there '71 to '77.

**BIRKNER:** So Chicago from '71 to '77, and were you as happy there in '76, '77 as you were in '71, '72, or did you start feeling like it was time to move on? Sometimes people move because

it's a design, and sometimes people move because they've burned out. There are different reasons why people move on, and I'm trying to get a sense of your dynamic.

**MATTSON:** The line I usually use is we got tired of it. Even though it sounds more prosaic than in Brooklyn, life was still intense, and the energy required to carry it out was significant.

**BIRKNER:** And during your time there did your congregation remain as big as it was when you came?

**MATTSON:** There was no appreciable decline. It was clear that times were changing. By and large these were well-to-do black people, many of them who had come up through Englewood and done well and moved to the better neighborhoods on the South side. And the women were much more educated, better employed than the men. The better-employed men were postal workers; the better employed women tended to be teachers. Many of them were very significant actors in South Chicago's history. But they had seen the Lutheran Church, this church in particular, as a kind of way to enter into a little higher social realm; it was a class thing. They were leaving behind the emotional religion that--

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Why Lutheran as opposed to Methodist or Presbyterian or Roman Catholic?

**MATTSON:** Well, in this case because the church had welcomed them. I don't think they had any particular affinity for Lutheranism.

#### **TAPE CUTS OUT TEMPORARILY**

**BIRKNER:** ... your Chicago experience, and at a certain point then you get tired and it's time to think about other things. Tell me about the background to how someone who's an urban pastor in a predominately black congregation in Chicago winds up in as white bread a college as you can imagine [laughter]. How does that happen?

**MATTSON:** Well, I was looking to see what jobs were available and a man by the name of Martin Carlson, who was, had succeeded my father as president of the Augustana Seminary heard that Gettysburg was looking for a chaplain, and I guess he knew I was restless. I guess he asked if I were interested and he submitted my name to [President C.A.] Hanson, who called me on the phone.

**BIRKNER:** And the Hanson you're referring to is of course C. Arnold Hanson?

**MATTSON:** That's right.

**BIRKNER:** So he simply told Hanson that there was this good guy out there in Chicago who could conceivably do the job that Gettysburg needed done?

**MATTSON:** That may not be the way it happened.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Did you apply for the job?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I may have applied for it.

**BIRKNER:** Alright, so let's back up again. The job opening was made known to you and you put your name and resume in.

**MATTSON:** Yes, I must have.

**BIRKNER:** To whom would a potential chaplain submit a resume?

**MATTSON:** Believe it or not Dave Crowner was the chairman of the chaplain search committee.

**BIRKNER:** Alright, that's exactly what I wanted to know. And, so obviously you had some communication with him, if only formally at the start to send in a letter, and so describe –

**MATTSON:** It may be what I just said is still true, and having read my resume Hanson called me before I came, but I cannot recall.

**BIRKNER:** Okay, well tell me a little bit about what you do recall about the process by which you were appointed. I assume you came here for an on-campus visit. Why don't you start with that; tell me about what you noticed.

**MATTSON:** Well, it was much less extensive than visits are today. I think I simply met with the committee and the president and other key people in the college, and then they got together and offered me the job.

**BIRKNER:** Was Harold Dunkelberger one of those people?

**MATTSON:** I can not recall. Dave Crowner was a key person.

**BIRKNER:** And did you meet Frank Williams?

**MATTSON:** Yes, I did, I'm sure.

**BIRKNER:** And what kind of things were they interested in knowing about you?

**MATTSON:** They were sort of curious about me. I'd been talking about my background. They saw the pattern as confusing, but when I talked about it they were interested.

**BIRKNER:** Because in the end if you've got any smarts you want to connect the ivory tower to the real world.

**MATTSON:** I think that they liked the fact that I was in a black church; that intrigued them in some sense. They liked my sermon. It was a sermon on the madness of Jesus, I recall.

**BIRKNER:** Did you have to do a sermon as part of the job application process?

**MATTSON:** No, they took a pig in a poke.

**BIRKNER:** I see, and so what was Marge's reaction when you told her this opportunity existed?

**MATTSON:** [laughter] Oh mercy. There's a certain ambivalence with me. Even though it was more difficult for her there than it was for me, we had good friends.

**BIRKNER:** It was almost, you know you're almost parallel to being army families [laughter].

**MATTSON:** For that period, yes.

**BIRKNER:** You're move—

**MATTSON:** See the kids were still young enough to move; at least I figured they were young enough to move them.

**BIRKNER:** Well how old was your oldest then?

**MATTSON:** The oldest was just entering high school.

**BIRKNER:** So at that point there was still an opportunity to make a new set of friends, etcetera. What were your observations insofar as you had any at this point about the place that you would be coming to become chaplain? What had you either heard through word of mouth, or what did you notice with your own eyes?

**MATTSON:** Well I can remember my first view of Gettysburg I thought "my God, I've never been [inaudible]".

**BIRKNER:** Very different from the streets of Chicago, right?

**MATTSON:** I can remember I was, you know ego gets the better of you so many times. I can remember I saw the Chapel, I suppose I saw the Chapel filled with students [laughter] which wasn't the same, but I was impressed by the Chapel. Arnold Hanson was a very good president. Arnold took a particular shine to my wife, probably more to Marge than to me; that was helpful. [Dean of the College] Len Holder was a key person in the process. Len and I [became] close friends, we always related well.

**BIRKNER:** So you had good chemistry with the president and the dean when you came here.

**MATTSON:** In fact, yes in fact the chemistry continues with Len.

**BIRKNER:** Well, let me say this, I always thought, and this goes back a long time, from when I first met you, that one of the biggest challenges that you would have faced, and I don't want to get us too far ahead in the story, but I think this is relevant because you must have known about John Vannorsdall, was that you would be coming in to succeed someone who was almost a legend, who had been powerfully influential. A lot of people would say that in the 1960's he was the second most influential person at Gettysburg College beside the president. You could argue Hen Bream was, but that's a whole other story. Did you know Vannorsdall personally, and did you have any sense that you were stepping into the shoes of someone who'd been very successful?

**MATTSON:** I did not know him personally, but I knew of his preaching and teaching. He was a national preacher for a time on the Lutheran Hour –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] and that was while he was still at Gettysburg College?

**MATTSON:** I may not have known his sermons, but I knew he was a wordsmith as well, and I was somewhat intimidated by that. I also quickly picked up that he was very good with many students.

**BIRKNER:** Looking at it from the perspective of students who are questioning the establishment way of doing things, students who are frustrated or whatever with the war, these kids often gravitated toward him and he provided the kind of mentoring or just simply the sounding board that they needed at that time, and I think that that was one of his greatest [strengths].

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] the Chapel Council--it's amazing. Of all the things I did wrong when I came here [the worst] was not to work as closely as you would think I would have with the Chapel Council. The Chapel Council was carefully assembled; it worked well.

**BIRKNER:** When you say it was carefully assembled, who assembled it?

**MATTSON:** Vannorsdall.

**BIRKNER:** But it was students.

**MATTSON:** Yes, students, but I didn't learn to work with students in that way for many years after I came here. The Chapel Council in some ways replicated the way the Center for Public Service was organized, but I didn't have those smarts and skills when I came here as someone to perpetuate it.

**BIRKNER:** When you came what did Hanson think your job should be? Was it to, because what You've got is a declining slope of Lutheran students on campus.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] It had already begun. Attendance had already begun to decline. At its peak the Chapel attendance when Vannorsdall was here, the attendance was around 280, and it had already begun to decline and continued to decline during the years I was chaplain.

**BIRKNER:** And of course part of that is that you have fewer and fewer Lutheran students.

**MATTSON:** In 1964 there were 40% Lutherans I think, and that in so many years by the time I was, I don't know, 1980's, but those percentages aren't exactly large, forty plus percent Roman Catholic. The start of that decline [was Vietnam].

**BIRKNER:** And of course just the general secularization of culture as well.

**MATTSON:** Right, and you know, and Lutheranism was very key in the college. When I came here all the department chairs were Lutheran, but now that's not a factor.

**BIRKNER:** No, not at all.

**MATTSON:** But I wasn't all that much of a Lutheran either.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] Well, what did you want to accomplish here?

**MATTSON:** I suppose my lingo was pretty much in place by the time I got here. This business I use about carrying students out into the world to encounter realities they would not otherwise encounter, and visualizing the college as a place where those energies would be reflected upon, and thus preparing students for the world that is. That's always been my interest, which dates, as I inferred from the world we first experienced in Brooklyn. Not first experienced, but intensively experienced.

**BIRKNER:** And what were your relationships with agencies and institutions downtown that enabled you to get kids just out of –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I was good at getting out and meeting people, involving students. When I came here, for all that Vannorsdall did, there was very little structure in place to bring students out into the field. There were only four social service programs in the Chapel, and there had never been more than that. One was at Green Acres, one was a very fine Big-Brother Big-Sister program, another was with Thalidomide kids, I forget the name of the institution – Child Development Center in Abbotstown, something like that, and what was the fourth one? Tutoring I think. There were a minimal number of kids involved in social service.

**BIRKNER:** Right. He was more exploring the internal developments of kids, is my understanding. You have the communities at risk kind of thing where you sit together–

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] which we continued.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] and talk, or retreats and overnights and stuff like that where you talk about what really matters to you.

**MATTSON:** We expanded the community of risk program when I came. For many years I was gone two nights a week at the least.

**BIRKNER:** I did not know that.

**MATTSON:** We invented another one that dealt more with faith issues. I don't know how many years.

**BIRKNER:** Could you put a generalization on the kind of kids that gravitated to these programs at Gettysburg College? Because you know, if you look in a total macro-sense at Gettysburg College, when you came into the next decade, the macro-take on the college was it was a wild and crazy place with fraternities dominant, alcohol freely used, kids really not hunkering down to their studies or to their community outreach, but actually just sort of living the life.

**MATTSON:** I never thought that way until you just said it.

**BIRKNER:** That's why I'm asking about it.

**MATTSON:** You know the fraternity crap I didn't like, nobody did but – the line I use is there were always more open doors, there were always more doors open than I could walk through, so who the hell am I to complain? The kids we got, you couldn't predict where they'd come from. My ATO was sort of divided between drug use and social justice people. We got a lot of the latter from ATO, and ATO had Little Sisters –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] sororities, sister sorority or whatever, yeah.

**MATTSON:** Well they were known as the little sister for ATO.

**BIRKNER:** Yeah, that's it.

**MATTSON:** And a lot of those young women were really gung-ho social justice people; A lot of good students, a lot of people alienated by the fraternity system, looking for a place. The Chapel Choir was also a collection of a lot of good student types relating to the Chapel. They were fifty, sixty kids in that Chapel Choir.

**BIRKNER:** When I came here first in 1978 – 79, I'm not sure how I signed up for it, but you advertised a program where we went out to Wilson College and did an overnight there and had an outside person from Tennessee, I think, sharing some of his experiences and challenging our conventional wisdom.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] We had eight, ten witnesses if I recall.

**BIRKNER:** Now what was that program? I don't have a remembrance to –

**MATTSON:** Well, I can't remember the name of it, but Lisa [Portness] and I helped that take off.

**BIRKNER:** But she wasn't here then.

**MATTSON:** Wasn't she?

**BIRKNER:** No, she didn't come until I had left, I don't think. [Birkner left in May 1979 and Portness arrived in August 1979. Birkner returned to the college in August 1989.]

**MATTSON:** Well, I don't know who my department was then.

**BIRKNER:** I know for a fact that I went on this overnight to Wilson with you in '78 or spring ;79.

**MATTSON:** Well, we did that kind of thing for several years.

**BIRKNER:** I was very impressed by the students, and I remember how appalled I was by some of what I saw at the college when I came back. I hadn't been back for seven years. I came back to teach for a year. I thought that the whole campus, the whole spirit of what I had seen in the late sixties was completely shot, and it was a totally different environment, and the students I taught were just not very aggressive about their studies for a lot of it, . . . so going off to your camp and meeting this other set of kids who really did have a sense of social justice was refreshing.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] John Vannorsdall, I think, nourished that spirit.

**BIRKNER:** But obviously it was congruent with your own guidance.

**MATTSON:** I can't generalize where the kids came from who worked in the Chapel. The Wednesday night service was a key time.

**BIRKNER:** Tell me about that.

**MATTSON:** Well, early on forty to sixty kids would gather for sort of a touchy-feely communion service on Wednesday evenings, and a lot of relationships were established through that.

**BIRKNER:** I'm not quite sure I understand though, if it's a service you have a certain ritual you follow? How touchy-feely can that be?

**MATTSON:** Well, we all sat up in the choir loft and we bathed the place in as many candles as we could light, and it was just a very intimate service; sort of semi-formal. Students liked it.

**BIRKNER:** And how often did you make connections with people who were not Lutheran on the campus, or people who were not regular church attenders.

**MATTSON:** I didn't even know who was Lutheran and who wasn't.

**BIRKNER:** I guess what I'm trying to ask you too is what was your outreach to the faculty or administrators or others who were not your normal constituency here of students? Did you have faculty friends? Did you have faculty that were interested in your programs? That kind of thing.

**MATTSON:** One of the shocks I had when I came here was how few faculty were truly interested in the program. I'd been used to functioning in a community where there, were structured support groups that you related to and worked with. It really bothered me that that didn't exist here. Initially I found that and extremely lonely job. That being said, there were certain faculty who provided significant support; Richardson being one, Norman and Nancy

being two of them, the Holders being others. Dave and Kathy Cowan used to provide some support. There'd be some faculty who would attend at times. Norm Forness provided support. I could go on naming names, but there were –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] obviously the Crowners.

**MATTSON:** Although the Crowners were never much in attending service. They were devout at St. James.

**BIRKNER:** That's right. Now what did you make of Norm Richardson?

**MATTSON:** Well, I would make of him what you already described, is you couldn't always make out what Norm was saying, but you knew that he cared for you, you know?

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] That's very true. He had very expressive eyebrows.

**MATTSON:** [laughter] I know the program, one of the programs he started in philosophy –

**BIRKNER:** Contemporary Civilization.

**MATTSON:** That opened a lot of kids to a certain amount of stuff.

**BIRKNER:** Absolutely.

**MATTSON:** So I knew that he'd done that. I loved Norm, and after chapel on Sunday usually we went up to his house and drank a glass of sherry, my wife and I and the kids, and they acted as surrogate grandparents. And that seems off the wall and all, but that was the joy early on, thought it became a problem later, but they were very helpful.

**BIRKNER:** Did he ever ask you to do anything on the academic side, or no?

**MATTSON:** No.

**BIRKNER:** Did anybody ever ask you to do anything?

**MATTSON:** Gradually, but not much to start with even though I had, I wasn't aware at the time, but I had faculty status.

**BIRKNER:** One question I sort of skipped over but I'll ask it now was when you came here did you have a session with Arnold Hanson in which he sort of gave you marching orders of any kind?

**MATTSON:** I would say I was welcomed in as clumsy a way as I've ever been welcomed anywhere when I came to Gettysburg. The way I was welcomed, there was no real reception, but I stood on the stairs of the Chapel after my first sermon and Arnold stood next to me, and people were supposed to file along and shake my hand. That was the extent of my welcome.

**BIRKNER:** That was it?

**MATTSON:** That was it.

**BIRKNER:** And I'm just trying again to get the date, you see Arnold was only president until May of '77.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, Charlie [Glassick] was a much larger figure.

**BIRKNER:** Just in terms of chronology here, I have you down from Chicago from '71 to '77.

**MATTSON:** I came here in '77, February of '77.

**BIRKNER:** --the last months of Arnold Hanson's presidency. So let's shift gears for a second to Charlie Glassick. He's appointed sometime in the spring of '77, he's coming on board in the summer of '77.

**MATTSON:** First non-Lutheran. [Actually not. General Willard Paul was a Presbyterian.]

**BIRKNER:** He was raised, I think, a Presbyterian but he became a Methodist in Gettysburg. . . . In any event, he told me an amusing story once about just showing up at the Methodist church in town and them being so amazed and delighted.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] He became disillusioned out there sooner or later, but for a while it was significant to him.

**BIRKNER:** Tell me about your first meeting with Charles Glassick.

**MATTSON:** I don't remember my first meeting, but Charlie and I had many good times together. As I mentioned to you before, when he, he got a bit pompous after he left here, but he wasn't that way when he came.

**BIRKNER:** So you first met him in the fall of '77?

**MATTSON:** I think I first met him when the Chaplain was still on the President's Council, and so I suspect my first real acquaintance with Charlie was at a President's Council retreat at Allenberry that year.

**BIRKNER:** What did you make of him?

**MATTSON:** I must have liked him right off. I was intimidated by the President's Council. I didn't know what the hell I was doing on the President's Council. They saw me as some [kind of adviser]. When there were moral dimensions to a particular question I was supposed to brief them. And occasionally I could be useful there because I wasn't afraid to speak my mind, but I didn't make relationships with the President's Council. But John of course belonged there because he and Hanson were, at least for a time, were like peas in a pod.

**BIRKNER:** Right, that frayed a bit toward the end I think.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, but I didn't have that relationship with Charlie. Charlie gave me a lot of freedom, and as he once said to me, in terms of getting out into the world and building bridges to these realities, he said, "you're all we've got so you better get out there."

**BIRKNER:** [laughter]

**MATTSON:** Now that wasn't literally true, but he saw me as an important figure.

**BIRKNER:** Did you need resources to do what you did, or did you not need –

**MATTSON:** He gave me resources.

**BIRKNER:** You did have some financial needs to accomplish your goals, such as going out, or banners, and things like that. And Charlie was supportive of what you were doing?

**MATTSON:** Yep, always.

**BIRKNER:** And did you worry much over the [demographic] decline? You mentioned the downward slope of Lutheran students. I was going to ask you if that bothered you being the Lutheran chaplain, but you just said a minute ago you weren't really that in to being a Lutheran chaplain.

**MATTSON:** I was in to being a chaplain, but not a Lutheran chaplain. You know, anyway, Lutheranism isn't interesting really. . . .

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] So you're looking for kids who were asking the questions and who were interested in social issues, you're not worried about whether they're Roman Catholics or Lutherans or Jews or whatever.

**MATTSON:** That's right. A lot of Catholics attended.

**BIRKNER:** And so kids did come and worked with the programs that you were helping sponsor. How quickly do you put some kind of a stamp on what's going on in the Chapel that entails outreach and commitment beyond what is internal? Did you follow up and say, "this is a place where you're gonna go and do community service"? I mean ultimately you're heading in that direction, but how quickly are you articulating that as the chaplain?

**MATTSON:** Well I had no other faith. I mean, the first test is to walk the walk and then you reflect, as we all did, about what you've experienced, so without the experience you've not much to deal with. We began; for example, I was taking kids down for a while almost once a week to man shelters in Washington D. C., chiefly at Thomas Circle where John Steinbruck was pastor, and also to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Street Shelter with Mitch Snyder. Both were representatives of the homeless

in Washington. I'd haul them off, faculty didn't like it. I'd haul them off at 6 PM at night and get them back at 6 AM the next morning; they weren't fit for class, but they stocked the few shelters.

**BIRKNER:** And you had kids who were willing to go with you?

**MATTSON:** Uh huh, who would love to go, who found meaning in going.

**BIRKNER:** I read that that was always part and parcel of your system, where you reflect on whatever it is you've done.

**MATTSON:** And that's standard service learning procedure. I learned it no other way. I didn't learn about race relationships in the book, I learned a lot about race relationships on Pacific Street in Brooklyn. I didn't learn about the Great Migration by reading a book on the Great Migration, I listened to people who went on the Great Migration.

**BIRKNER:** Well, there's no question that's the best way to learn. Now, of course, when you came to Gettysburg, even though it is the mid to late 1970s, you had to have observed in some respects, Gettysburg was a pretty backward community on certain things.

**MATTSON:** [laughter] Yep, in a way, the phrase I used earlier is still true. There were still a lot of kids who knew a lot of things and weren't interested, but there was never a shortage of recruits.

**BIRKNER:** You're talking now of the College, I was actually referring to the town and the interactions you had with the town, because when I was a student seven or eight years before you came, you had county commissioners who wouldn't take federal money because it might result in people in the third ward getting some help from that money. You had county commissioners who literally weren't interested in programs that would help the citizens in their own community because you had to have a certain skin tone.

**MATTSON:** I had a certain number of those experiences, yeah.

**BIRKNER:** And when I interviewed John Vannorsdall he told me some experiences that he dealt with in terms of race and such.

**MATTSON:** And he did some things.

**BIRKNER:** He did some things. But as far as you were concerned you were able to work with the people you needed to work with, is that it? You didn't run into people who told you that you were just a damn do-gooder and get the hell out?

**MATTSON:** The one experience that was clearly like that was when we started a twenty-two team soccer league for Latinos that caused trouble of various kinds, you know about that, but I went out to the growers and asked for money for that league and I got that kind of response from the growery.

**BIRKNER:** "We're not gonna help you."

**MATTSON:** They can fund their own soccer league, and they were rude. I mean it wasn't that you didn't have that experience.

**BIRKNER:** It occurs to me that there's a certain coming full-circle on a different racial issue, if you will, and that is that you started out in a Caucasian-Puerto Rican church, and you come to Gettysburg and there's an increasingly large Latino population in Gettysburg, and you clearly were interested in reaching out to that population is your recent comment.

**MATTSON:** And we did a lot of things.

**BIRKNER:** I would say for my perception that for a long time Latinos were invisible in Adams County unless they, you know, got into some trouble with the law.

**MATTSON:** I think the most significant social justice act in my time here may have been moving the Latino mass to 12:00 noon. [Father Joseph] Hilbert did that. Suddenly these people were visible. The first time that I knew they existed was in the first amnesties in '84. And I knew

there were Mexicans around here, but man, the Catholic charities ran their information session in the Chapel and suddenly the whole neighborhood –I think we had 1,200 people two nights in a row at the Chapel, all Mexicans.

**BIRKNER:** That's amazing!

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] It blew my mind, and I didn't even know these people were here.

**BIRKNER:** Well, that was my point, is that you came in at a time when they were largely invisible, and I think your work was part of the work that helped to integrate more folks into this community, and raise the visibility and awareness among the white people who lived comfortable lives that there was a different demographic in this county. I'm proud to say that my daughter has volunteered at this Hershey Medical Mission to migrants to get them basic medical care, as a translator for the medical staff that volunteer by going out into the Latino community.

**MATTSON:** That's such an important role.

**BIRKNER:** She feels that she gets more out of it than she puts into it, because of her interactions and the learning experience and the stories, and she's glad she did it. So where were you two, your family was living out in Colt park, is that right?

**MATTSON:** Highland Avenue.

**BIRKNER:** Highland Avenue. So the kids grew up, went to school in Gettysburg and lived on Highland Avenue. They went to Gettysburg public schools. And how did they take to the transition from Chicago to Gettysburg?

**MATTSON:** The two youngest did well, the oldest less so.

**BIRKNER:** Culturally deprived, maybe?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, well not culturally. No, just relationally, it didn't work. She was lonely.

**BIRKNER:** And high school's a tough time to be the new kid on the block.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] Right. And she had good experiences, but it was essentially a tough time.

**BIRKNER:** Functionally the family was happy in terms of –

**MATTSON:** Yeah, Lee Jordan who was the librarian at the Seminary was leaving at the time, so we took his house, and Marge took her job at St. Francis.

**BIRKNER:** And so Marge began to teach fifth through sixth graders at St. Francis, right?

**MATTSON:** Yeah.

**BIRKNER:** And so she was there, obviously, for a good long time.

**MATTSON:** [laughter] Yes, longer than I was at Gettysburg College.

**BIRKNER:** Well, you know this may not go on the transcription, but I can tell you that we're all grateful that my daughter had her because I think she set Madeline on a very good path in terms of language and language skills.

**MATTSON:** Well, the truth is, if you were to ask me what parish I most related to, I related to St. Francis more than I related to St. James, I mean because of Marge's work there.

**BIRKNER:** . . . Alright, so in terms of the College, I get the impression that you're your own man, you're doing your own thing, you're finding clientele, things are happening.

**MATTSON:** Slowly; it took a long time.

**BIRKNER:** I mean, the College asks you also to make invocations and benedictions at various events. That's part of your task is it not? How did you do with that? You were at faculty meetings, right? You were giving people a little bit of –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I should ask you what the reception was, because you probably know better than I.

**BIRKNER:** Well you did you feel about it?

**MATTSON:** Awkward, often. I mean, [Former Provost Baird] Tipson used to joke regularly about all the things I've blessed that I don't believe in.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] Baird was on to you, huh?

**MATTSON:** [Former PR Director] Bill Walker was on to me too. He used to lampoon my performance at places.

**BIRKNER:** That's interesting. Now, in addition to that formal role, did you do crisis counseling or does that go to a different form of the College? I mean, when kids were having serious –

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I would do some crisis counseling. I never set myself up as a counselor. I would do, I would do regular counseling, but I didn't –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] more in the realm of we'll talk to you about life and what your possibilities are and things like that.

**MATTSON:** Vocational issues, but I would do a certain amount of, inevitably, crisis counseling, intervention. Frank Williams would use me there on occasion.

**BIRKNER:** So that was part of your portfolio?

**MATTSON:** Counseling has always been very protective of their role on this campus.

**BIRKNER:** Right. As far as Glassick was concerned, he was satisfied with the job you were doing?

**MATTSON:** Was Charlie satisfied with the job I was doing?

**BIRKNER:** Did you get memos from him saying "I hear that you're doing X, stop it," [laughter] or anything like that?

**MATTSON:** Well, Charlie's line was that he read somewhere that, he did my personal evaluation for years about how well I was doing, his line was always he read somewhere that you

had to say twelve or thirteen good things before you could get to your criticism [laughter] so you always had to count on that.

**BIRKNER:** Well, then you waited to see what was in the second page or third.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] The first note of the page, but I'd be surprised if I can even remember my evaluations in writing.

**BIRKNER:** What's more important I suppose is the vibe that you felt. If he's given you a positive vibe and doesn't say you have faults, then you're doing alright.

**MATTSON:** Yeah.

**BIRKNER:** Were you aware that Charlie had difficulties at the end of his presidency?

**MATTSON:** Yeah.

**BIRKNER:** With Baird and Julie [Ramsey]?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I knew —

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] He felt betrayed by them?

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] I know that story well.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] yeah.

**BIRKNER:** Did they confide in you that they were concerned?

**MATTSON:** Well, not Baird, but Julie did.

**BIRKNER:** Do you know why Charlie felt betrayed?

**MATTSON:** Well, because there just some particular elements in their evaluation of him and he'd become increasingly sensitive about criticism back then.

**BIRKNER:** I interviewed Julie about it for a pamphlet I wrote about Charlie some years ago and I have the pamphlet if you ever want to see it, it's available, it's flattering about his presidency, but I did include this episode, and he only focused on that, I think, when he read the

pamphlet [laughter]. I don't think he was happy with it in the end even though I said that he did a very good job as president.

**MATTSON:** My take on Charlie, if Charlie would act immediately, it tended to be good, but if he would reflect about it, it would just, oh my God.

**BIRKNER:** [laughter] It's usually the opposite.

**MATTSON:** But he had good instincts. He had good initial instincts about a particular situation, but then he would want to appear better than that, and it would go [downhill]. The worst speech I've ever heard since I came here was one he gave at the Lincoln event. He was trying to appear profound about Lincoln, and it just, it was god-awful.

**BIRKNER:** What were the circumstances for him to talk about Lincoln?

**MATTSON:** It was one of these Lincoln events.

**BIRKNER:** Oh, like the 1982 Lincoln 150 thing the board put on?

**MATTSON:** Oh, was it awful.

**BIRKNER:** Oh my.

**MATTSON:** But I mean if it was just out of his heart it was good stuff.

**BIRKNER:** That's an interesting insight about Charlie, and I think you're on to something.

Now, Charlie left in '89 and we had an interim for a year and then Gordon Haaland came in.

Gordon actually grew up a little bit in Brooklyn before moving to New Jersey –

**MATTSON:** I know the story.

**BIRKNER:** Bay Ridge, you know the story, but Gordon really had become pretty secular by the time he became president.

**MATTSON:** [laughter] I mean he tried chapel for about two months, and then he never came again.

**BIRKNER:** Yeah, and I don't believe he joined a church in town; if he did I'm not aware of it.

**MATTSON:** I think he was a skeptic. Maybe an Agnostic, I don't know.

**BIRKNER:** Which wouldn't have necessarily bothered you.

**MATTSON:** No, it didn't.

**BIRKNER:** I guess the question again is how do you get introduced to him, and how do you connect with him?

**MATTSON:** I reported directly to him for a time, but eventually he didn't [continue that].

**BIRKNER:** What did you make of him as a president?

**MATTSON:** I never had bad feelings about him. I didn't really know him. I would learn more about him from Dave Cowan who worked closely with him.

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] Well, they were very good friends.

**MATTSON:** And Dave and I are good friends. The standard line on Gordon was that he gave you your space, and if you worked well within that space then he'd leave you alone and let you go. He only intervened in my work when people got upset by safety issues. For example, I had students in Chiapas, Mexico, right after the massacre and he pulled that trip. And there were a few other things like that, but he was always very gracious. I tried to relate to he and Carol for a while, but eventually I gave up.

**BIRKNER:** Did you get the sense that you have sort of different interests in life?

**MATTSON:** Yeah, but he was always very supportive. In a distant way he was always very supportive.

**BIRKNER:** Well, that leads me to the next major thing, and that's Service Learning. Where does this develop? Is this something that you went to either him or somebody else and said I

think “this is something we’ve gotta do full time,” or is this something they said, “we want you to do”?

**MATTSON:** No. When Gordon came here, he established those commissions, were there seven commissions –

**BIRKNER:** [overlapping] yeah, yeah, yeah.

**MATTSON:** [overlapping] to do non-exciting things.

**BIRKNER:** The so-called Commission on the Future.

**MATTSON:** Yeah, and the first one to report was on, not on service learning, it was on, what was that guy who wrote about servant leadership?

**BIRKNER:** OK.

**MATTSON:** Anyway, they recommended reestablishing the Center for Public Service, and that was, I think, the first and the only time there was a result from that commission, and then I was given the choice by Gordon and Julie whether I wanted to stay in the Chapel or go to the Center for Public Service. Julie sent me a postcard, but it was a “damned if you do damned if you don’t” kind of postcard. I debated that for quite a while. First I was supposed to do both, but they in their wisdom decided I should do one or the other, and I chose the Center for Public Service. How am I answering your question?

**BIRKNER:** You’re answering it.

**MATTSON:** Service learning was then in the wind; it was what colleges and universities were doing, so I set out with considerable financial support from the people. I spent a lot of time at Stanford, I spent a lot of time at a business school in Boston, Bentley College. Anyway, I went around; University of Michigan. I was getting ideas.

**BIRKNER:** And you came back with some ideas.

**MATTSON:** Service learning had always been my method, because that's the only way I've learned, well, that's the main way I've learned some things. If you understand what I mean by that.

**BIRKNER:** Experiential learning.

**MATTSON:** Uh huh. But anyway I really got to know the best people in the field, and that gave me ideas enough, and knowledge to begin institutionalizing it here. That sounds a little high-fallutin, but that was how it developed, and a lot of those people became my friends.

**[END OF TAPE]**