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Harold W. Horton

University of Massachusetts Boston

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An Interview with Dr. Robert M. Franklin, Jr., President of The Interdenominational Theological Center Atlanta, Georgia

by Harold W. Horton

In 1996 the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia named Dr. Robert M. Franklin, Jr. as its sixth president of the seminary. Previous to this appointment, Dr. Franklin was Program Officer for The Ford Foundation. He is a graduate of two theological seminaries, The Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary in Columbus, Ohio and the McCormick Theological Seminary at the University of Chicago.

Harold W. Horton: Dr. Franklin, congratulations on being appointed the new president of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta and I certainly appreciate having the opportunity to conduct this interview with you. To begin, please give a brief overview of your personal background, that is, where you were born and raised; colleges that you attended and your family circumstances.

Robert M. Franklin: I was born and reared in Chicago in an extended family household that included a grandmother, two parents, two uncles and one aunt. I am the oldest of six children. I was also reared in the St. Paul Church of God in Christ where my family spent lots of time during the week. I attended Morgan Park High School in Chicago and went on to Morehouse College in Atlanta. I spent a year in England at Durham University before returning to earn an Masters of Divinity degree at Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago.

HWH: How would you describe your feelings, in general, with regard to your new appointment?

RMF: Standing before what is likely to be the adventure of my life, I am excited, inspired, energized and anxious and contemplative all at the same time.

HWH: What are some major goals and objectives you will attempt to accomplish in the next few years at ITC?

RMF: I would like ITC to become a more effective learning center, think tank and clearinghouse for the Black

Church first, and for all communities of faith in the United States and around the globe.

HWH: What are your plans and strategies for making certain that you will have the financial resources to accomplish your major goals and objectives at ITC?

RMF: We will project our vision of the role a seminary can play in transforming the Church and the society and then ask our friends to help the implementations of the vision.

HWH: What state or condition, in your opinion, do you believe ITC is in, overall at this time?

RMF: President James Costen has navigated the school into a secure harbor. ITC is growing and its prospects are very bright. We will need the assistance of the media and journals, like this one, to help us tell the story more effectively.

HWH: Are theological seminaries in America experiencing difficult in encouraging students to pursue a career in or a calling to the pastoral ministry?

RMF: Generally speaking, in the Black community there is a no shortage of available clergy people. We don't have a supply problem; we may have a quality supply challenge. That's why all seminaries in America must do a better job of attracting, retaining, supporting, and placing African-American ministry students.

Most mainline white churches are facing a serious long-term clergy supply problem complicated by declining white birth rates. Someday, white churches may have to face the prospect of hiring a Latino, Asian or African-American pastor. Many have already begun to embrace this opportunity in a hopeful way.

HWH: Describe the role that you would like to see graduates of ITC assume in their respective congregations and communities as related to social, political, and economic development.

RMF: I'd like ITC graduates to be on the front line of community revitalization alongside other professionals. Pastors can offer moral vision for the economic and housing development that must be initiated. They must remind us that new homes and new jobs will make new people. Also, clergy must encourage and guide people in the arts of democracy. We've got to return to the heightened political consciousness passed on to us by early generations of activists like Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Dr. Martin L. King, and Ella Baker.

One encouraging note on Black political participation, the Million Man March appears to have energized Black men who voted in record numbers in 1996. Religious leaders must continue to promote such responsible citizenship.

HWH: To what extent do you believe that the role or significance of religion or the Church is in the Black community has changed?

RMF: Following the Civil Rights Movement the Black Church faced new challenges with the rapidly changing demographics in the Black community, changing political culture, and changing global economy. The Black middle-class grew and many physically left the traditional Black urban enclaves exchanging them for suburban life. Blacks have higher education, new cultural loyalties, and raised expectation for the quality of their worship experience. Presidents Reagan and Bush's domestic policies were hostile towards blacks and other ethnic groups. This encouraged despair and disengagement from the political process, encouraged many Black men to leave the Church.

With the changes in the global economy, including the attractiveness of cheap labor in developing countries, the competitive strength of many Asian nations, the United States economy began to restructure resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of high-wage, low-skill jobs which many Black families had benefitted from in the 1950s and 1960s. This added financial hardships to families and churches.

All of these dynamics impacted the Black communities oldest and most significant institution.

Today, people are coming back to spirituality, God and the church, temple and mosque. But, they return with expectations that clergy will respect their intellects professional abilities, and standards. The Black Church is becoming more relevant to our lives as it was during the freedom struggle. Thanks to the presence of exciting new Black preachers who began to build strong mega-churches and to lead the struggle for justice, we are in a hopeful place on the eve of a new millennium. I will discuss these issues in my next book.

HWH: Do you have a favorite theologian? Tell us a little about such person.

RMF: Booker T. Washington. I know that is not a name you expected. Washington had an incredible leadership challenge—to transform the thinking and behavior of former slaves in ways that would advance Black freedom without arousing white hostility. He preached a gospel of the “head, hand and heart,” and viewed religion as an holistic and practical affair. Now, Washington was somewhat superficial when it comes to the depths of spiritual existence. For guidance with that, I enjoy exploring the work of the Black mystic/activist, Howard Thurman.

I am also enriched spiritually by the Asian evangel, Watchman Nee, by the German Lutheran, Paul Tillich and by the sister from Detroit, Aretha Franklin.

HWH: In what way(s) do you believe that religious leaders could do more to bring about racial harmony in their respective communities?

RMF: Religious leaders should continue to hold up God's vision of a reconciled humanity for us. We need to see the vision constantly and teach others how to make progress on a day-by-day basis. It would also help if leaders in the spirit of atonement, would admit our own complicity with racism, antisemitism and bias towards people who differ from us. We need visions, rituals, examples and gatherings that remind us of Dr. King's unfinished agenda.

HWH: What's your general attitude concerning the issue of prayer in public schools in America?

RMF: People ought to pray all the time, to live in an ongoing dialogue and consultation with the Creator. I do not oppose ritual prayer in public space but I'm very cautious about the possibilities of abuse and disrespect of the spirituality of those who may differ from the dominant tradition.

HWH: What, in your opinion, is indicative of the recent burning of churches in the Black community?

RMF: The burnings are a complex and varied form of social evil. Some are racist attacks against the most cherished institution in Black life. Some are anti-religious expressions of troubled people. Some are nonideological manifestations of madness and mental illness. The portion of them that are racially driven concerns us most because it represents the violent resurgence of a long-standing racist agenda to subjugate or exterminate people of color.

HWH: Finally, Dr. Franklin, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for granting me the privilege to conduct this short, but highly informative interview with you. I realize that you are in the process of wrapping things up at The Ford Foundation and probably thinking enthusiastically about your new challenge as the President of ITC. On behalf of the Trotter Institute, we extend best wishes to you and the Center.

Harold W. Horton is associate director of The Trotter Institute. He teaches in the Graduate College of Education and the Africana Studies Department at University of Massachusetts Boston. Dr. Horton holds a Ph.D., as well as two degrees in theology.