

SOLOS FROM THE CHOIR

A BOSTON BLACK CHURCH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview Guide

Solos from the Choir is an oral history project that documents the history of the Black Church and the Black Christian experience in Boston through audio-recorded interviews with senior congregants, clergy, and community members.

Capturing the oral histories of Black senior saints inspires reflection, preserves tradition, and helps give insight into assets and resources within churches that enable them to perform effective ministry.

The Black Church has historically been a place for Black people not only to worship but also to mobilize and organize for social change. It has served as a hub for social services, education, employment, voter registration, child care, and more.

By interviewing senior church members and recording their stories, we are not only learning our own history but also preserving Black history.

You are invited to use this guide to interview your pastor, a senior member of your church, or a family member about their experiences.

This is an initiative of the [Boston Black Church Vitality Project](#) (BBCVP) in partnership with stakeholder churches.

There are over 250 Black Churches in Boston. To learn more about them, visit blackchurchvitality.com where you can search an interactive map and locate churches by denomination, ethnicity, and neighborhood.

If you have any questions, please email the BBCVP team at info@blackchurchvitality.com.

WHO WILL YOU INTERVIEW?

Select an elder

Select the elder you want to honor with your interview. The ideal interviewee is not only willing and able to be interviewed but one who can provide a reflective, historical perspective on their life as a Christian in Boston.

You are encouraged to choose elders who are 70 years of age or older.

Here are some additional considerations for selecting an interviewee:

- How long have they been a part of your congregation?
- Have they served in ministries or witnessed major church transitions, such as a change in location or pastoral leadership?
- Have they been active in their community outside the church?
- Are they looking for ways to engage more deeply in ministry now?

These are just a few things to consider. If you have elders that have been a part of your church for decades, or you answered ‘yes’ to any of the questions above, then that elder may be a good candidate to interview.

TIP: “Good talkers” or elders that are known for their storytelling are not the only candidates you should consider. Dig a little deeper and look around — maybe this is an opportunity to hear a story you haven’t heard before.

Invite them to be interviewed

Once you have selected your elder, invite them to be interviewed. Share with them that you are conducting an oral history project and you would like them to share their experience as a Black Christian in Boston with you. Explain to them why you chose to honor them specifically with this interview and why it’s important to you. If it’s helpful, share the project flyer and any other information that will help you clarify what you’re inviting them to be a part of.

TIP: Make it personal! When approaching the elder with an interview request, share with them why their story matters to you.

PREPARING QUESTIONS, PLACE, AND TECHNOLOGY

Review, select and share your questions

Plan for an interview that will last 60 to 90 minutes.

Review

Read through the Interview Questions document and familiarize yourself with the questions. The interview questions are divided into two sections. The first section is 12 required questions that every person being interviewed should answer. Please also choose four to six additional questions from the optional questions or include your own.

TIP: When selecting optional questions or writing your own, choose ones that interest you! What question would you like to know the answer to? It's also a good idea to consult with the elder you are interviewing. What would they like to talk about?

Share

Once you have selected your questions, share them with the elder you are interviewing. Allow them to ask any questions they may have regarding the interview process. This will enable them to prepare for your conversation.

Find a quiet, comfortable place to meet

Arrange a time when you and the elder you are interviewing will be relaxed, alert and uninterrupted.

Meeting in Person

Due to COVID-19, we advise meeting in person only if you live in the same household as the person you are interviewing.

Get ready to record

Make sure your phone has at least 500MB of available storage space as audio files can be large. Test the application you will be using to make sure you are familiar and comfortable with it.

Have the interviewee sign the release form

We ask that each interviewee sign a form acknowledging that their story will be archived and might be used for ministry, educational, and research purposes.

HAVING THE CONVERSATION

Introduce yourself

Start your recording with an introduction so that anyone who listens to the interview knows who you and the elder you are interviewing are.

Sample script:

My name is (interviewer's full name). Today is (Month, Day, Year). I am recording this interview in (City, State) and I am speaking with (interviewee's full name). This is an interview for *Solos from the Choir: A Boston Black Church Oral History Project*.

Use the questions as your guide

Both the required and optional questions are designed to avoid questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no.” Open-ended questions allow the interviewee to steer the conversation toward what is most important to them.

Using follow-up questions to go deeper

While you will be using the list of questions as your guide, be prepared to ask follow-up questions that help bring more clarity, depth, and detail to what the interviewee is sharing. The following phrases can be useful in helping people to go deeper.

- Then what happened?
- Can you tell me more about ...
- How did that make you feel?
- What were you thinking about at that moment?
- What do you mean by...

Listen well

The questions you select will serve as a guide. If the interviewee goes off-topic, it's OK to let them. You can always redirect them back to the question later. The important thing is for them to feel comfortable sharing memories and perspectives that are meaningful to them.

If you are interested in what they are talking about it might be tempting to jump in and share your own stories and perspectives. As much as possible, try to steer the conversation back to them. We find that when an interviewer has a posture of curiosity, openness, and being themselves it sets a good tone for the interview.

TIPS FOR LISTENING WELL:

- Don't interrupt. Let someone finish their entire thought before commenting or asking the next question.
- Don't rush the person or cut them off. The space is intended for them to freely express themselves.
- Pause between questions and don't be afraid of silence. In conversation, we sometimes feel uncomfortable if there is a pause in the conversation. Brief pauses in conversation get people to go deeper and think of more things they want to share. Don't be afraid to let there be a few moments of silence between questions.
- Acknowledge when people are sharing something personal or sensitive but don't provide commentary. Often just saying, "thank you for sharing that with me" is enough.

Clarify the context

Future listeners might not be familiar with specific people and places that the interviewee mentions. Ask them to clarify the details. For example, "who is Elder James?" or "When you say neighborhood, what neighborhood do you mean?"

Be open and curious

This is a wonderful chance to learn more about the interviewee and capture their experiences. It should be a fun and rewarding experience for you and them. Be yourself and enjoy the process.

Take a picture and gather materials for archiving

If you are conducting the interview in person, take a picture with the interviewee.

The interviewee might decide to loan photographs, print materials, or other archival materials to the BBCVP team for one week so that we can make copies to be included with their interview.

Thank the interviewee

At the end of the interview, save a few minutes to tell the interviewee your appreciation for them and their willingness to share their stories with you.

TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING ELDERS:

These are important to remember for any interview subject but especially relevant for elders.

- **Schedule the interview at their ideal time of day.** Find out when your interviewee feels most alert and energized and schedule the meeting within that timeframe.
- **Pay attention to signs of fatigue.** Participating in an interview takes a lot of energy. The more tired they are, the less your interviewee will be able and willing to remember and articulate details. It's better to shorten the interview if the interviewee seems tired or distracted.
- **Be sensitive to difficulties hearing, speaking, and remembering.** Be prepared to repeat yourself. Let the elder set the pace, and be respectful and patient as you listen.
- **Have respect.** This is important to practice both inside and outside the interview space.

SHARING THE INTERVIEW WITH BBCVP

Send all materials to the BBCVP team

Please email the audio file(s), release form, and any accompanying pictures to info@blackchurchvitality.com.

If a BBCVP team member needs to pick up archival materials or you borrowed a technology kit, they will schedule a pickup.

Solos from the Choir is an initiative of the Boston Black Church Vitality Project (BBCVP). This interview guide was created by the BBCVP with inspiration and frameworks from the following sources:

StoryCorps User Guides. <https://storycorps.org/stories/>

Story Bridges: A Guide to Conducting Intergenerational Oral History Projects by Angela Zusman

For more details about any information appearing in this guide, contact info@blackchurchvitality.com.

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Interview Questions

These interview questions are divided into two sections. The first section is 12 required questions that we would like every elder being interviewed to answer. In addition, please choose four to six questions from the optional questions or write your own.

REQUIRED QUESTIONS

Please ask all 12 of the following questions

- Where did you grow up?
- Who was the first person who brought you to church?
- What church do you attend now?
- How long have you attended this church?
- Can you share your conversion experience or a story about how you came to faith?
- What role has the church played in your life?
- How would you describe your relationship with your pastor?
- What kind of relationship has your church had with the broader Black community over the years?
- In what ways do you observe your church being distinct or similar to other churches?
- What is one of your favorite memories of your church?
- Can you share an important moment that helped shape your identity as a Black person?
- Can you share a story where your faith gave you the courage to speak out against injustice?

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS

Please choose four to six questions from the following sections. Check the questions you will ask for easy reference during the interview. Remember to consult with the elder you are interviewing about what they would like to talk about.

Church, community, and faith

- Have you seen your church go through a major transition or difficult time? How did you all make it through?
- Can you share a story in which you witnessed the church bring restoration and purpose to your life or someone else's?
- How did you imagine God when you were young? How do you imagine God now?
- What is your favorite Bible story? Why?
- What do you look forward to the most about attending church?
- Did you ever have a profound spiritual moment in your life? Can you tell me about it?
- Can you describe a time when your faith was tested and how you overcame the test?
- Can you imagine life outside of a faith community? What would it be like?

Being a Black Christian

- What lessons have you learned being Black and Christian?
- Can you describe a time where you experienced racism? How did you overcome it?
- How has being Black impacted how you read the Bible?

Life lessons

- What do you feel most grateful for in your life?
- Can you describe one of your happiest memories?
- What are your greatest accomplishments in life?
- What is one biblical warning you wish you had heeded?
- If you had the opportunity to do something over again, what would you redo?

The Future

- If you could offer one prayer for the future, what would it be?
- What is your advice to a young Christian growing up in today's world?
- If you could change one thing for Black people in Boston, what would it be?
- Do you have a vision for the future, what does it look like?
- What is your hope for the church's future?

Write Your Own Questions

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Interview Release Form

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the Solos from the Choir Oral History Project. This initiative of the Boston Black Church Vitality Project (BBCVP) documents the oral histories of Black senior saints and legacy pastors in Greater Boston to inspire reflection, preserve history and help give insight into assets and resources within churches that enable them to perform effective ministry.

You are being asked to participate because you are an asset to the Black Church and we believe your story can help encourage the faith community to continue the work of ministry to God's people.

Throughout the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences as a Black Christian and community member in the Greater Boston Area. Before the interview, you will have the opportunity to preview all of the questions and decide along with the interviewer what you want to talk about. You can expect the interview to last about an hour.

Your participation is voluntary and you can choose to stop the interview at any time for any reason.

Your interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and made available for public and scholarly use on the Boston Black Church Vitality website and shared with your church. It may also be used in publications and exhibitions.

We appreciate your participation in this important project. If you have any questions, please ask your interviewer or contact Jaronzie Harris at info@blackchurchvitality.com or 617-262-4567.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep and refer to at any time.

Full name of person interviewed (print): _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Date of birth: _____

Name of interviewer: _____

Date of interview: _____

Please check all the below boxes and then sign:

- I confirm that I understand that by checking each box I am consenting to participate in the Solos from the Choir Oral History Project.
- I confirm that I have read and understood the above information about this project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions that have been answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop the interview at any time without giving any reason.
- I understand that this interview is being recorded and the audio file will be transcribed into written text.
- I confirm that I give the Black Church Vitality Project permission to use my name in connection with the written transcript and audio recording of my interview.

Doing so grants the Black Church Vitality Project, permission to the rights of the sound of my voice as recorded on audio or the written transcription without payment or any other consideration. I understand that my interview may be edited, copied, exhibited, published, or distributed, and waive the right to inspect or approve the finished product wherein my likeness appears. Additionally, I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising or related to the use of my image or recording. I also understand that this material may be used in diverse ministry settings.

Signature of interviewee

Date