

This is a complete transcript of the oral history interview with **Torrey Maynard Johnson (CN 285, T7)** for the Billy Graham Center Archives. No spoken words which were recorded are omitted. In a very few cases, the transcribers could not understand what was said, in which case [unclear] was inserted. Also, grunts and verbal hesitations such as “ah” or “um” are usually omitted. Readers of this transcript should remember that this is a transcript of spoken English, which follows a different rhythm and even rule than written English.

. . . Three dots indicate an interruption or break in the train of thought within the sentence of the speaker.

. . . . Four dots indicate what the transcriber believes to be the end of an incomplete sentence.

() Word in parentheses are asides made by the speaker.

[] Words in brackets are comments made by the transcriber.

This transcript was created by Marissa Lemmen and Paul Ericksen and completed in June 2001.

Please note: This oral history interview expresses the personal memories and opinions of the interviewee and does not necessarily represent the views or policies of the Billy Graham Center Archives or Wheaton College.

Collection 285, Tape 7. Oral history interview with Torrey Maynard Johnson by Robert Shuster on August 14, 1985.

JOHNSON: ...resignation [?] paper here, and I don't know who has it. It may be that Bob Cook had it in his files. But at any rate...at any rate, I had given a certain amount of time to Youth for Christ, and I was still officially the pastor of the Midwest Bible Church in Chicago. I was a pastor on leave, and Bob Cook who was...was my assistant pastor, was in charge of the work while I was gone, and that was a wonderful combination. He was my brother-in-law for one thing which gave a certain strength to our relationship. And at the same time he was a very loyal co-worker. So that being pastor on leave of absence I could go back from time to time, which I did. I went back whenever it was convenient for me to go back or I had a reason to go back and preach and bring in other leaders from around the world. And our church was just an enthusiastic center of evangelism and also for Youth for Christ. But I had made a commitment to go back to the church. That was number one. And I knew that I couldn't keep on giving my time to YFC and still hold the church sort of dangling in that connection. And then I thought too that Youth for Christ was so demanding that one man would have given...made a major contribution in a certain limited period of time, and it would be good to have another man who had renewed energy and new ideas to come in as a successor. And I gave that a great deal of thought and a great deal of prayer. And during those years I had opportunity to go other places too because as a result of Youth for Christ I was invited to become actually the president of a number of different schools: at Biola in Los Angeles, Northwestern College in Minneapolis, the college of Walter Wilson in Kansas City, so on, I forget, about eight or ten of them. But still all this time I had a commitment to the church and wanted to keep that commitment to the church. So about six months before our annual meeting in Winona Lake, I drew up a statement of resignation, which I submitted to the board and told them six months ahead of time to be thinking and praying about who should be my successor so that when we got there in July it wasn't something that came out of the blue. It was something that I had premeditated and thought through and felt God wanted me to do it. So I did it, but very interestingly at the time that I did it they were meeting in what they call the Rainbow Room of the Westminster Hotel at Winona Lake. That was a hotel owned by Homer Rodeheaver. And we had a great many of our business sessions...in fact all of our business sessions were in that Rainbow Room of the hotel. And we had a prayer meeting, and about a hundred and fifty men were there in this prayer meeting on our knees. And there were ones who were praying that I would not resign, I should carry out, I should carry on. But there was one fellow, who had been a protégé of G. Campbell Morgan that was now pastor of a church in Muskegon, Michigan, who prayed differently. He was an Englishman from the old country, and he said something to this effect, "Dear Lord, don't pay any attention to the prayers of these other fellows. You told Torrey what he ought to do. Now Lord, let him do it." And, of course, I don't know...I don't remember whether there was a chuckle around the room or what. Anyhow, I'll always remember how he prayed at that time. So I was deeply grateful for the prayers of the men and shaken to some extent by them, but felt in the quiet of another day I had made that decision, felt it was right and did. And I have no misgivings up to the present time about that decision. I think I made the right decision. And if there is anything I would say about Youth for Christ over the years it would be this: that I would be just a little bit concerned that maybe some of our presidents have stayed longer than they should, that Youth for Christ might have benefitted by some changes where men have stayed over a longer period of time.



SHUSTER: Do you think there should be some kind of constitutional provision that a president leads for a fixed period of time or...?

JOHNSON: I'm not sure about that. I just don't know, and I'm not sure that I'm right. I'm not sure that I'm right. I suppose that those men that stayed for a longer period of time would feel as I did that they stayed the time they should. But I always felt that the work was so demanding in the field of, not only of physical energy and emotional energy, but ideas and visions and creative ventures, that you could possibly exhaust a man's ideas over periods of time.

SHUSTER: Did you feel you were being drained of that?

JOHNSON: I think I was drained. I think I was drained. I...I worked night and day, months on end, just caught up in the movement of the Holy Spirit, you see. And I had a lot of racehorses as you can know when I did suggest the names of these different people, and most of them did not have nearly as much background as I did. Some of them had no background whatever. When you realize I bought Billy Graham's first airplane ticket and took him to Europe when he and I hardly knew what Europe was, he less than I did and so on.... So that's the story anyway. And I felt...I felt at that time that Bob Cook was God's man as my successor because he is more of an administrator than I would have been, and he could put the pieces together a little bit better. I felt Billy Graham couldn't. Billy might have been the president, but I felt that Billy Graham was a preacher and couldn't be bothered with all of that detail and shouldn't be bothered with it, although it was possible that Billy could have. And as I look back on it now, maybe it would have been different if Billy had been president. And I think the men would have taken either Billy or Bob, and I...I felt myself that Bob was probably better qualified at that time for that job [train passing background].

SHUSTER: How do you think it might have been different if Graham had been president?

JOHNSON: Well, Billy has...Billy has demonstrated what he can do with an organization, and maybe he could have done that with YFC. Although, had Billy advanced [?], he probably never would have had the association of George Wilson had he not gone to Northwestern in Minneapolis, and George Wilson is the backbone of Billy's organization. So those are things about which you can speculate.

SHUSTER: How was your resignation received at the general meeting?

JOHNSON: Sir?

SHUSTER: How was your resignation received at that more general meeting when it was announced?

JOHNSON: Well, I don't know. I don't know. My mind is hazy on this particular point. I don't recall anything special in the big meetings where we may have had, say, four or five thousand or more people in attendance. You see, it wasn't a democratic organization. The general public didn't vote. It was just the officers and that particular group that voted on these things. So I don't recall that there was anything special. Now maybe there was, but I was caught up in it, and I didn't notice.

SHUSTER: Why don't we talk a little about Bob Cook. What would you say would be his contribution to YFC?

JOHNSON: Well, Bob Cook's contribution to YFC...you see he's very...been very close to me. He started ministry with me back in 193... '31 as my song...my choir leader in a little church on the west side of Chicago. And then he finished his work in school, went down, got a church in...went to Philadelphia...went to Philadelphia later on, graduated from the Eastern Baptist Seminary. Then he came back to La Salle, Illinois, as a pastor. Then he came back to become my assistant pastor as my church was growing. And he was my good right hand man. When we started the Chicagoland Youth for Christ he was right at my side all the time. He followed through. He was the man with the pad of paper and the pencil, together with my secretary, that followed through. He was my follow-through man.

SHUSTER: And what...and what do you mean by "follow through"?

JOHNSON: I had ideas, work. "Now, Bob, this is what we're going to do. You see that it gets done." So he followed through on all of my ideas for me and with me, and he was my song leader through my first Youth for Christ rally in Chicago. He took care of the advertising for me, the promotion for me, all that detail of one sort or another. Just a marvelous man.

SHUSTER: What kind of influence did he have as president?

JOHNSON: Sir?

SHUSTER: What kind of influence did he have on the organization as president?

JOHNSON: Very good. The organization developed you see, expanded under his ministry. Under his ministry the high school Bible clubs first started which are called Campus Life clubs. We had a little of that during my time, in Kansas City particularly, under Al Metzger and Jack Hamilton. They started having clubs in different schools. And then some other cities did it. Then it became a project of Youth for Christ to have these clubs. Also under his ministry, the Lifeline program was developed, having to do with kids with problems, kids released by the court to Youth for Christ, kids turned over to Youth for Christ by various different organizations to see what they could do for them. Some of the other ministries of Youth for Christ developed under Bob Cook that we didn't have under my ministry. Under my ministry we had the Saturday night rallies. We had the campaigns for Youth for Christ. We'd have a campaign in a city, or a city would have a campaign but Youth for Christ was the catalyst that brought all the people together. See the Baptists didn't go with the Presbyterians, but the Baptists and the Presbyterians, they would go with Youth for Christ. And that still is true today that Youth for Christ is a marvelous catalyst for so many different things. People who get together on what they consider a neutral ground in Youth for Christ when they hesitate to do it on certain other grounds. So my ministry was the evangelistic. I think under my ministry we had the rallies. We had the campaigns in different places, a week of campaign, a weekend of campaign here and there and so on. We'd have the work promoted in the overseas through G.I.'s, through missionaries like the Hillis brothers [Dick and Don]. The Hillis brothers had been missionaries in China, and they took up with Youth for Christ out in China and

so on. So the G.I.s and the missionaries out there, I had to deal with that over there and campaigning over there. And under Bob Cook, things became more consolidated. They got these clubs going. They got the Lifeline work going, things of that sort going. Then as I looked at it, under Ted Engstrom.... Carl Bihl was in for a short time, about a year or so, interim. Then under Ted Engstrom, the organization became more finely tuned as an organization. And we developed a new generation of technicians and public relations men, and the preachers weren't the major thing anymore and aren't today the major thing. So most Youth for Christ men are not particularly preachers, but they carry on these ministries which are very valuable ministries. But it may be that a new day will come when they will have more preachers and more meetings and more outreach of that kind. I think it's important that they do it. But that's been development of it, and I'm just thankful for what's been done.

SHUSTER: It seems that after the first few years a great many of the originators of Youth for Christ left, like yourself, and Billy Graham, Bob Evans, and others. Do you think this is so, and if...if it is, do you think it effected the way the organization developed?

JOHNSON: I think it...I think two things. Number one, Youth for Christ didn't have the capacity to hold these men. Now whether that was a weakness of myself and of the organization as such or whether that was a normal thing, other people can determine. But there was a ministry for Billy Graham [bumps or pounds table] to do, and there was a ministry for Bob Pierce to do. There was a ministry for Bob Evans. There's a ministry for Paul Free. There were always ministries of different men, so they broke off in these different directions and pursued those ministries so that Youth for Christ has been known as having been given birth to so many different activities. It may be that Youth for Christ didn't have the capacity to hold them. I don't know, or it may be that that was normal development. That's the one side of it. The other side of it is that particularly following Bob Cook, although Bob Cook bears some of the burdens for that too, they moved in new directions so that the need for the preachers didn't seem to be there. And they didn't develop the preachers. After all, preachers are challenged by preachers, and preachers develop disciples as it were. I wa...I was challenged by Paul Rader. Billy was challenged by Paul Rader and certain others along the way, Mordecai Ham and so on, to the [?] preachers. If Youth for Christ had some preachers there today, other young fellows would be challenged to become preachers, but it has been that way so that I think there are two sides to it. They broke away because the whole generation of giants, I think, of a certain kind. And then at the same time, those who followed on after me didn't particularly encourage that in ministry.

SHUSTER: What was Dawson Trotman's association, connection with Youth for Christ in the early days?

JOHNSON: I met Dawson Trotman...I met Dawson Trotman when I moved to California the first time.

SHUSTER: When would that have been?

JOHNSON: For the Dr. Torrey conference. I think that would have been in the first part of January 1945. I met him on the stairway behind the platform at the Church of the Open Door. He

was associated with [bumps table] Hubie Mitchell and others, [unclear] Youth for Christ or as they call it the Saturday Night Jubilee. That was my first association with him. And my impression of him: he was a lean fellow, very lean fellow and a certain attractiveness to him. There was fire and determination within him. But beyond that I don't remember anything particular at that moment. But later we had a convention in Los Angeles, and one night we went to the home where he lived. It was his home. Someone had provided a home for him in Pasadena. And we had a fellowship in his home, and then had a meeting sitting around on the floor in his living room. And I wanted him to speak to our men because our men were not given overly much to the memorization of Scripture, and that was my background, [unclear] stays on to memorize the Scripture. "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee." [Psalm 119:11] So...and I knew what he was doing in Navigators and the emphasis on the memorization of Scriptures. So we sat on the floor there, and he gave us an hour, two hours, or whatever it was on how to evangelize the world, that the world was not going to be evangelized by campaigns and meetings. It was going to be on a one-on-one basis. He said, "You win five people to Christ; it takes six months to establish them. And these five together with you become six, and you six each win five more. Six times five is thirty plus six, so then at the end of the year you've got thirty-six. If these thirty-six each win five, in the next six months of time to get them established, and that's a larger number." I think he had it figured out that in somewhat less than twenty years you would evangelize and if nec...if possible would have won every person in the world to Christ. So he gave that to us. And he was not at that time very much interested in mass evangelism. He was much more concerned with his one-on-one and his discipleship programs. But we had a good meeting then. It was a fine thing. I wanted our men to have it. A number of our men agreed that they'd learn the first ninety verses that he has in his program. At the close of that meeting, by the way, we had a communion service. But before we had the communion I asked Billy to give a few remarks. I'll never forget that. Billy said, "There's one verse of Scripture that scares me more than any other verse in the Bible." "What verse is that?" "We shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ." [2 Corinthians 5:10] He said, "I am more scared of that verse than any other verse I know, that one day I'm going to stand before the Lord to give an accounting of everything." Then we had the communion, we had prayer, and that was the end of it. But the interesting thing about Dawson Trotman was he made two changes in his life. The first change he made in his life was, not in chronological order I think, in an ordinary [?] way. The first change he made was he came to see the benefit of mass evangelism associated with the one-on-one. When God made him become the director of Billy Graham's follow-up work, the counseling and the follow-up work, which was something when I first met him he never would have dared to me [?] that he'd ever do. The second thing where he changed his mind was he started out not willing to take an offering to support the work. And I told him one day, I said, "Dawson, you don't really believe the Bible, do you?" He said, "Why?" I said, "Well, in 1 Corinthians 16, Paul said now when I come I don't want to be bothered about any money so get all your offerings ready before I come so we can get down to the business of Bible teaching." I said, "Do you claim to be a follower of Paul if Paul was with Christ?" I said, "Paul took offerings." And he changed after that, and he began to solicit legitimately money for the work of the Navigators.

SHUSTER: Why do you think he changed his mind concerning mass evangelism?

JOHNSON: I think circumstances changed him.

SHUSTER: What were those circumstances?

JOHNSON: The very fact that Billy called upon him to do the follow-up work. Billy thought that...Billy was looking for some way of establishing those that responded to the invitation, and Billy had nothing particular to offer them except maybe someone to pray with them and give them a verse of Scripture and a little tract. But Dawson had a more thorough scheme of following up. And in those days Billy used to send out, in response to his invitations, a little packet of Dawson's Scriptures for people to memorize, those first verses you memorize that help you so much in the assurance of salvation. And then as a result of that Dawson actually took charge of the altar for Billy Graham. He prepared the follow-up. Then [Charlie] Riggs came in afterward, and Riggs has stayed with him ever since. But Riggs was one of Dawson's men. And so it was a development where Dawson was driven by circumstances. It's just like a good many of our Reformed people who had been taught for generations that you don't give invitations. If God's going to save somebody he doesn't need your help. But when people saw Billy Graham on television, saw people responding to the invitation, some of our Reformed people had to rethink that. God doesn't need your help, no, but He chooses to use you, and he could use you in the invitation just as much as He could use you in the preaching. If God can use me to preach, He can use me also to invite.

SHUSTER: Before we wrap up there's one other question that I had wanted to ask you about. We were talking a little earlier about Frank Phillips. I recall reading a...in a clipping from the time of the 1950 Portland Crusade that Graham held there that at that time he had offered Phillips to become head of his organization. Did you know anything or hear anything about that?

JOHNSON: I don't know much about that, but I know that was true. By the way, that campaign was in a tabernacle that was built for it. I just mention that in passing because in Billy Sunday's day they built tabernacles in the city because you didn't have civic auditoriums, and this is one of the few times that a tabernacle was built for one of the Billy Graham meetings. But yes, Billy did want Frank Phillips, and he thought...felt, and I think rightly so, that Frank could have done the job for him. But Frank was not prepared to leave either Portland, and the work there or prepared to leave Bob Pierce and the work he had with Bob Pierce at the time so that I think the right decision was made at that time.

SHUSTER: I suppose Graham was familiar with him from Youth for Christ.

JOHNSON: Oh yes, yes. Billy knew Frank very well, and we had many...we had had a...we had had a Youth for Christ convention in Portland at what was called the Multnomah Hotel. Multnomah Hotel was owned by the family of Mrs. Charles Fuller, which was downtown. And Frank...yes, Frank and Billy were very well acquainted, good friends in the very earliest days.

SHUSTER: Well, I think this would be a good time to bring this interview to a close.

JOHNSON: I think so.

SHUSTER: I want to thank you once again [microphone bumped] very much for your willingness to come down and...and share these experiences.

JOHNSON: Well, thank you very much. I hope that these things will do some good...

SHUSTER: I believe they will.

JOHNSON: ...for some folk along the way that may have a chance to glance at them and understand something about how God the Holy Spirit works because Youth for Christ... Youth for Christ can only be explained on the basis of a work, a genuine work of the Holy Spirit of God taking people who were available and willing, some with brilliant talent, some with very little talent, but all of them with a good measure of dedication to Christ. And may God do it again and again.

SHUSTER: Amen.

END OF TAPE

