INTERVIEW WITH
BETSY AND CHARLES RACKLEY
NOVEMBER 8, 2018

Page Smith: Today, November 8th, 2018, we are interviewing Betsy and Charley Rackley. Good afternoon.

Betsy: Good afternoon.

Page: I think we're recording now. Let me just make sure.

[background sounds only]

Page: OK, we are recording. Would one of you all like to tell me the story of when you came to Christ Church, if you can remember what year and how you chose Christ Church?

Betsy: I'm going to let him speak to that because he was impacted by a former rector.

Dr. Charles Rackley: Yeah, we came here in 1982. I was a new Chairman of the Department of Medicine at Georgetown University Medical Center. Our rector at the Cathedral Church in Birmingham, Alabama -- I think his name was Brinkley Morton -- had known Sanford Garner.

He said, "By all means, you should go to Sanford Garner's church there in Georgetown." We visit a few episcopal churches. We went to Christ Church. We were quite impressed with Sanford. The Betsy's remark was that the parishioners were so old and so ancient.

Page: That's what I thought, too. [laughs]

Charles: I'm not sure we would have much in common with them. We were hesitant initially. We finally returned and were just so fond of Sanford. I remember distinctly that the services were limited because they had no nine o'clock family service.

Page: Did you go to 8:00 or 11:00 in the beginning?

Charles: I think it was 11:00 at the beginning.

Betsy: 11:00 at the beginning, yes.

Charles: 11:00 at the beginning. We just were so impressed and so fond of Sanford that he attracted us to the church. [laughs] There was some revelations about the age of the parishioners and everything.

Peter Gilsey was one that took us under his wing. Then Sam Hough was originally from Birmingham, Alabama. He saw the Birmingham tag on our car. Those were two of the men that initially approached us
and were very friendly and encouraging us to come back to the church.

It started off on a note of hesitation, but we just grew in many ways to adore and enjoy the church. Betsy has a lot more to fill in.

Betsy: I was just going to say we had two children at that time who were younger. What were they, 12 and...?

Charles: Edward was in Episcopal High School. He was about 15 or 16. Our daughter Colman was about two years younger, about 14. She was in the process of getting enrolled at Madeira, so both of our children were in the area.

Betsy: They didn't go through the Sunday School Program because they were boarders and they did write. They'd write.

Sanford Garner was such a special man that we felt just totally at ease with him. He had known our former rector very well. There was a real connection there. We didn't even look at any other churches. Once we walked in there, we knew we were home.

Charles: After a few years, Sanford had encouraged me to get on the vestry. I remember he and his wife invited us over to dinner one night. The dining room was a very dark color. It had a dark green wallpaper.

The two other male members of the dining party were Bishop Johnny Walker from the cathedral and a young priest that Sanford was thinking about recruiting as an assistant.

Page: This was in the rectory?

Betsy: Yes, that's where we were.

Charles: It was a young priest that Sanford was thinking about recruiting whose name was Stuart Kenworthy. The rumors had begun to circulate that Sanford was contemplating retirement.

We said, "Well, I think the tradition is that the replacement for Sanford could not be a member of the rectory at that time." We first met Stuart and, later, Bishop Johnny Walker, who took care of him during his tragic, premature death at Georgetown Hospital.

Page: Were you his doctor?

Charles: Yeah.

Page: I didn't know that. That's pretty neat.

Charles: Yeah, it was a tragic series of complications with him because he was a very healthy, young man
when he came in. Sanford called me.

I remember. I went down and spent many days with him. He had intestinal bleeding from a sight they couldn't identify, ended up having a colon removed, and had to have a heart surgery. He just died from those complications. It was really a tragic series of events. Then Sanford later mentioned to me when they established a Search Committee for Sanford's replacement.

He said, "I'm not going to give any information to the Search Committee other than I think the church needs a young priest." I said we had no family service and, somewhere, Glenn [indecipherable 6:07], I think, was the chairman of the Search Committee. He gave me the name of Father Andrew at the church in Manhattan to call about this young man, Stuart Kenworthy.

One Monday afternoon, after I finished at the office, I said, "Well, I've gotta do this." I called and I thought maybe Father Andrew would say, "Well, I'm busy. We'll set up a time." I said, "No, I want to talk to him right way."

He said, "As a young, married priest, I have seen no equals to him." He was just so complimentary about Stuart and what Stuart and Fran had done at the church there. I forget the name of the church.

Page: Was it Saint Thomas Fifth Avenue?

Charles: Yeah, Saint Thomas Fifth Avenue, yeah.

Betsy: I think it is.

Charles: We were so happy when Stuart came.

Page: You were on the Search Committee?

Charles: Yeah and I made the call to Father Andrew about Stuart, yeah.

Page: That's a really critical point in our church.

Betsy: Definitely. I agree

Page: It's funny because I came to Christ Church the same way, from my church in Chapel Hill. Peter Lee was a good friend of Sanford Garner's. My best friend was told by Peter Lee that we needed to come to Christ Church. It's really funny that he came back because that's the reason we were there, too. I also thought I'm the youngest person here.

Charles: Chapel Hill would be your home or...?

Page: Just for college.
Betsy: You knew Peter Lee there.

Page: There, because he was at Chapel of the Cross.

Betsy: Remember Peter Lee, Honey? He was a wonderful...

[crosstalk]

Charles: Sure, he was a temporary that did such a wonderful job.

Betsy: Yeah. He's back there now?

Page: He is back in North Carolina, but I forget. I think he is back in Chapel Hill because they retire back to there. It is funny. You wonder how many people that were brought to Christ Church because they were told that it was through a relationship with Sanford Garner. Isn't that funny?

I didn't realize that you were on the Search Committee for Stuart. That was in '92, I believe. Your first involvement with the church was on the vestry and then on the Search Committee, right?

Charles: Mm-hmm.

Page: When did you start doing flowers? We think of the Flower Committee and we think of Betsy. There's no question that that's your legacy, but I wondered. Did you flowers in Birmingham and that's where you came to say, "This is what I can contribute," or did it just organically happen, so to speak?

Betsy: All of that is true, but my mother had 200 rose bushes. My job was to deadhead the rose bushes. After doing that for about four or five years, I hated roses. [laughs] When we moved to Birmingham, I got involved with the church Flower Committee there.

Then, when we came up here, Sydney Thompson was the head of the flower guild here. Those ladies were unbelievable. We had Sydney and then we had Eloise Page. Who are some of the other ladies that ran the church at that point? Anyway, those two ladies. I don't want you to repeat this, but anyway they had their little bang-up together.

[laughter]

Betsy: They didn't really get along too well because...Anyway, that's neither here nor there. I just remember that she, for some reason, took a liking to me and did seen some flower work I'd done. She said, "I want you to take over the Flower Committee once I step down." I said, "Well, I'd love to if you feel like I can handle it."

Back then, it was a lot of older ladies. There was nobody my age anywhere in the grouping of the Altar
Guild, or the Flower Committee, or any of that. I did that. I took over from her. She was lovely.

Page: Do you think that was like in the early '90s? Was that before Stewart came?

Betsy: Yeah. I'm trying to think. I think it was about '88. What would you say, Honey?

Charles: I thought it was the late '80s you started doing the flowers.

Page: Maybe Stewart came in '91 because I remember Margaret was born in '92. This was around the same time Marion was.

Betsy: Anyway, so the older ladies...Sydney Thompson was such a strong woman that had been the head of the Flower Committee. Since she's the one that picked me, they slowly got used to the idea that I was going to be the head of the Flower Committee.

[laughter]

Betsy: It was an old ladies' milieu there when you came there, didn't you...?

Charles: Betsy's being modest. She's so mobilized and energized at Flower Committee, especially during the Christmas festivities and in Easter time, the decorations. Stuart made special mention of this in his sermons. The church was so beautifully decorated with flowers that some individuals started coming to the church just to see the flowers.

Page: [laughs] I think we might still have people who...

[crosstalk]

Page: It was nice when we did that flower show in the spring because I do think that brought people who care about flowers. You never know. Whatever brings glory to God.

Betsy: Exactly. That is a wonderful way to describe it because then they become parishioners. Then they get involved, and they love the church after that.

Page: In terms of your own ministry in the church, I was wondering as I drove over here. I wonder how many flower arrangements you've done on that altar if we could count them. I wonder.

Betsy: Then I became on the Flower Guild up at the National Cathedral, which was a very interesting experience because that's a huge altar. I had to stand on steps and ladder to start to do that, usually there were two ladies that would do the flowers on the altar at the National Cathedral, but that helped me with this church, too, because it taught me a lot.

Page: You've trained how many women?
[crosstalk]

Page: At least, two dozen by now, right? It's so wonderful.

[crosstalk]

Charles: It was going to be a prestigious committee to be on.

Page: Yes, I've heard. [laughs]

Charles: I remember the year that they had the business meeting for the church and [indecipherable 13:08] was, as I said, she was away most of the time, so they asked me to make some remarks from the...I was a junior warden.

I remember making the statement. I said, "Well, serving on the vestry is a very important responsibility for a parishioner. In fact, my wife told me that it's second only in importance to serving on the Flower Committee.

[laughter]

Page: I think some would maybe still say that.

Betsy: It was a different era back then because those lovely, older ladies were still around. They were Cindy Thompson, Eloise Page. I can't think of some of the other names right now, but...

[crosstalk]

Page: I know Eloise did Altar Guild. She did Flowers, too?

Betsy: No.

Page: She was running the show back that time.

Betsy: She and Sydney ran that female part of the church, that Altar Guild and the Flower Committee. Strong ladies, weren't they?

Page: Yes. I'll never forget. I was in a bible study with Eloise for a couple of years before I found out she was always packing a pistol in her purse, her CIA years.

Betsy: [laughs] I did not know that.

Page: I was scared of her before I knew that.
Page: You've spent most of your involvement in the church with flowers.

Betsy: Yes.

Page: You started with the vestry. You served on the Search Committee and helped to call Stuart Kenworthy. Has there been another committee or involvement that you have particularly enjoyed or anything that you would say made a difference in your...?

[crosstalk]

Betsy: The winter shelter has been important to us.

Page: Of course.

Charles: The what?

Betsy: The winter shelter.

Charles: Yeah, we worked on the...

[crosstalk]

Page: That's right. Your Friday night fish team. Let's talk about that. You all have a famous Friday night fish team that...

Betsy: Fish fry, yeah.

Charles: Catfish. [laughs]

Betsy: Wild catfish. We had Grit Salsa. They love it, the people that are there visiting and then moving on to other churches. They always say, "Oh, Betsy. Oh, good, some Southern food." They all like that kind of thing.

Page: For the purpose of this interview, to clarify this is for the Georgetown Ministry Floating Shelter, when it is housed at Christ Church, different teams take different nights. The Rackley's have been taking the Friday nights in the fall and the spring every year for many years and have a team of people who are dedicated to this particular team and this particular menu.

You all are famous, actually. Thank you so much for that. I'm sure that there have been a lot of grateful, hungry souls who were warmed by your dinners many times. Is there a shelter story that you'd like to
Charles: They're an interesting array of people that come to the shelter because although they were designated as homeless, some of them are fairly intelligent people. I guess they were immigrants that came.

Betsy: Some of them were very well-educated.

Charles: I was sometimes shocked at the social and cultural educational background of these individuals that came there. It really was an experience to meet and talk with these people. I think everyone from the church just enjoyed and were enlightened by being there. It really was a noble gesture on the part of the church to move out to...

[crosstalk]

Betsy: I'm so glad we do that. For us, it was fun because we worked with parishioners that we maybe didn't know before. That was very interesting. We got, all, to be pretty close. When you work together, that's when the church comes acting to mean so much to you, along with God, of course.

It's the people that you spend time with there, because we're all there for one reason. We enjoyed that part of our life a lot. Still do.

Page: Now, both your children are back at the church. Colman, her husband, and their children. You had a grandchild baptized.

Betsy: Just baptized.

[crosstalk]

Page: Just baptized last week. You just keep filling it up.

[laughter]

Page: That must be really fun for you. You know that your legacy will continue.

Betsy: At that church.

Page: That child could be around when we open the time capsule next time.

Betsy: Exactly. You're right. Yes, I'm really happy of all of that. We have two children, Edward and Colman, and they're both married. They really have stuck right with that church our church and want to go...
Charles: Yeah, that was a special moment for the entire family. That Sunday morning when I was ushering. As I went down with one of the last ushers to the Eucharist, Edward took the little baby ahead of me.

We were at the altar rail. I was next to Edward and he was holding the little baby. Beth Collins came up to me later and said she shed a tear when she looked up there and so the generations of the family, and [indecipherable 19:08]. That just the sweetest thing for her to say.

Page: Oh, absolutely.

Betsy: Yeah.

Page: Absolutely. It's too bad that we couldn't have a photo of that, but that's in her mind to share. That's so wonderful for you all. You deserve that.

Betsy: That church has been a major part of our life. Wouldn't you say, Honey?

Charles: Yeah. I was so impressed with everything that Stuart did. I was so close to him and his family. I got involved in some really serious health situations, especially with Fran. When he embarked on the program to renovate and restore the windows in the church, and the renovation of the church there, that was a major undertaking and he just took that over so smoothly.

I think they oversubscribed in the funds for that. I think they said the stained glass windows were at the point that they were falling out from the way they were leaded in. There were very few people that knew how to preserve those stained glass windows, so he made a major campaign in the restoration of the church.

Page: The restoration was a really important and critical time in our church. You remember when we were in service in the auditorium for all that time?

Betsy: Oh, yes.

Charles: Yeah.

Page: Seems like so long ago and here we are, enough time has passed. That was what, 15 years ago? I'm not sure, exactly.
Charles: About that time, because I remember that we were in the Keith Hall having the services. I looked over one side and Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense was coming to a service at that time.

Page: Yes, he did. Looking forward into the future of our church, what do you see as our challenges? What do you see as our blessings going forward, having just been through a transition? Now we have Reverend Tim Cole -- now, for two years. We are heading into our 201st year, but into our third century. What do you imagine for our next 50 to 100 years? As residents of Georgetown as well.

Charles: The one thing that caught my attention was in Tim Cole's politically flavored letter soliciting stewardship to the church. I didn't realize that the church was in debt for the renovations of the rectory and how important that is.

I recall how modest the endowment was back when I was in the vestry in the '80s. The Sanford amounts at one of the vestry maintenance, it was just two or three hundred thousand dollars. Just a paltry amount that was the total and it went downward for the church.

Several of the elderly female parishioners had proposed liquidating the endowment and giving the money to the poor. Sanford brought it before the Vestry Board. Serious discussions. Serious discussions, and wanted everybody's input before they declined the recommendation that we liquidate the modest endowment and give it away.

Financial stability, like so many other institutions in our society, is something that we really have to support for the new century. Going into the third century and dead doesn't really look good on the books.

Page: No, no. Building an endowment is a challenge for every institution in this city. We've all been asked to help do that, but it always is a challenge when you've got it coming in and going out, and sometimes it doesn't match up.

[crosstalk]

Charles: I empathize with the cost of living for our assistant rectors to... They can't afford to live here in Georgetown. There's great cost of the commuting [indecipherable 23:45]. I know Elizabeth has recently moved here, but the distances that she and Christian were commuting to come in to the church.

Yet, when I looked at the really modest little salaries these women were getting, I don't think it would cover the gas and their transportation.

Page: We're quite blessed that people would have that amount of dedication.

Betsy: Yeah, well put. That's what it is.

Page: That's the only way we can receive that. Yes, we have financial challenges to shore up. We surely have grown the use of the church, starting with Stuart. It appears, even though we were part of that
flourish of children, there are so many new babies. It does appear that we're still strong with young families.

Betsy: Good.

Page: Tell me about living in Georgetown from when you first came in the '80s to now and how the neighborhood of our church has changed.

Betsy: I'm going to let him answer that. To me, I haven't seen much of a change, to be honest with you. I don't know. How do you feel about, Baby?

Charles: So many of the parishioners, we discovered, over the years just lived in the neighborhood. Of course, you can't get very isolated in the neighborhood. We recently lived up at the cloisters. Then I used to drive in to the hospital early in the morning.

I'd be alarmed and say, "Will I ever feel comfortable in calling this area home." People were not all that warm and receptive in the hospital with all the challenges I faced down there in the neighborhood. You become a slow building of friendships and relationship.

The church was the real entry to learning about the neighborhood in Georgetown. As time went on, they really became dear friend, most of the neighbors as well as fellow parishioners.

Betsy: Definitely.

Page: When you came here in the '80s, did you move straight to this house or did you live to another...?

Betsy: We lived somewhere else for about...We moved here in '82.

Charles: '82, yeah.

Betsy: We moved to this house.

Charles: For about 12 years we lived up in the cloisters, on the corner. When we moved here, the mortgage rate was 16 percent for buying a home. We couldn't sell our home in Alabama. We couldn't afford one.

The university help us. At that time, the cloisters only had 10 houses built. There were just 10. There was a big vacant field out there. We didn't know what was going to happen to the field. We moved around and rented several houses here. One where Diane Salisbury is and another one, Dewey Campbell.

We just had to find some place to settle. We found one of the new little houses up there, but we lived there for 10 or 12 years. I'll have to tell you the story that, when we lived around the corner, rented that house. Betsy used to walk in front of this house. She could see through the window that there was a
garden in the back.

Betsy: [laughs] It was good [indecipherable 27:16].

Charles: She always had that in the mind that little house had a garden in the back. About 1994, we learned a man named Keck, who was a history professor at American University was going to sell the house. He was in his 90s. His wife had died and he had a girlfriend up in cape, and he was thinking about moving.

Betsy: [laughs] 90.

Charles: John Richardson had told us about the house and we looked at it. Walked in. It was kind of drab, a dark green wallpaper in there and I was dragging my feet at that time. My son pulled me aside walking down Winfield Lane and he said, "Dad, Mother really wants to buy that house. It needs a walk, too." I said, "Well, I'll see what we can do."

We called Mr. Keck, and Betsy told him she was interested in the house. Mr. Keck thought that she was a real estate agent and didn't want to negotiate with her. We then learned that Mr. Keck knew Sanford Garner.

Sanford called up Mr. Keck and verified that Betsy was genuinely interested in buying the house and that she was not a real estate agent. Sanford Garner made a major role in our being able to own this house.

Betsy: It all goes back to the church.


Betsy: Yeah.

Charles: Yeah.

Page: That is so cozy.

Betsy: It's because of Sanford Garner. We were sitting at this table when...

[crosstalk]

Charles: The first time we moved in here, John Richardson were doing the renovation and he was slow finishing up. It was on Thanksgiving, I think, and Betsy said, "We're moving into that house. We're just going down to spend the night. We had some furniture here.

That night, Sanford Garner stopped by the A&P Store and brought us chickens [indecipherable 29:10] and he brought dinner to us that night. [inaudible 29:13].
Betsy: An A&P chicken.

Charles: He was such an incredible man. Just can't believe we...

Page: We do have Mary Garner on the list to interview her.

Betsy: You do?

Page: I believe that Glenn is going to do her.

You've always been in Georgetown. I'd like to back up for people to understand who you are personally. Dr. Rackley, you came here to work at Georgetown Hospital. Tell me a little bit about your profession. I know that Betsy was a nurse and that's how you met. I love that story.

Charles: I'm what they call academic cardiologist. I spent many years at Duke, both in the University Medical School, training. I have some training in Washington, Seattle. Came back to Duke. That's when I met Betsy and got married with the permission of her father who was toughest neurosurgeon and dean of the medical school at the time. He gave me permission to marry Betsy.

Page: That was a Duke, right?

Charles: At Duke. We were there for a year or so. I got an exciting opportunity to go to a new lab in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. You know Duke and Chapel Hill compare. Nobody goes to Chapel, but we went over there. I had two-and-a-half of the most exciting academic years doing research.

Then I was recruited by the man I had worked for in the University of Washington to go down to Alabama. They were building up massive cardiovascular program right after the horrible scandal of some segregation problems they had in the early '60s in Alabama.

We were there in '68 and I ran the heart attack research program for about 10 or 12 years, a world-famous heart attack center. We pioneered everything that's done in a cardiac care unit today. We helped develop in that program. There were some other affiliated places at Duke, Hopkins, and Harvard.

I came as chairman of the department of medicine to build up the cardiovascular research in...

Page: At Georgetown?

Charles: Yeah.
Page: So interesting. Betsy, you were trained as a nurse, and that was at Duke as well, right?

Betsy: Yeah.

Page: You met Charlie there.

Betsy: I'll never forget how I met him. I was a surgical nurse. The more blood, the better. [laughs] He is a medical doctor. They don't deal much in blood. They usually deal...

Charles: I'll tell the story. I was a second year student and Betsy was a little candy striper volunteer about 15 years old. I saw her and she was the most beautiful thing, but I didn't dare go near her because her father was a world-famous neurosurgeon. He had the word out that he didn't want any medical student around his daughter.

Not only did I not approach her, but I finished medical school, had training at Duke and Seattle. When I came back to Duke, it was seven years since I'd ever seen Betsy Woodhall. She'd just broken an engagement with another young surgeon. I caught her at a weak moment and her father was very professional.

When I asked him for her hand, he said, "Well, she's had a lot of suitors, but you're the best that's come along."

Page: [laughs] Thank goodness. What's your side of the story?

Betsy: I agree. I concur exactly with his side of the story.

Charles: He was very proud of me. He was, at one time, temporary president of Duke University. He told Betsy that he had eyes in the back of his head and he could see everything she was doing.

[crosstalk]

Charles: She was very popular on account...She was homecoming queen, a beauty queen, everything else. Of course, I was never in the picture at that time. I couldn't have competed. I had to finish medical school.

Page: [laughs] You were a very patient man. Oh, my goodness. That's such a beautiful story. I love it.

I'd like to just ask you if there's anything that you would like to add to the record of your experience in Christ Church. When somebody opens this up 50 years from now, what do you think you could tell them?

Betsy: The friendships that you make there are important. The other part of it that is so wonderful is the sheer beauty of the inside of the church. I'm going to cry. You feel like God is there. I walk in, take a deep breath. I go, "Phew, God is here." That's the way I feel about it. It's just a really religious experience just
to walk in and sit down in the pew. What do you think, Honey?

Charles: Betsy came to understand I'm an early riser. I used to get up at two o'clock and get to the hospital at four o'clock. I always liked the eight o'clock service because I'd get there at seven o'clock. I used to have a cup of coffee with Glenn and then I'd go and sit in the sanctuary.

There wasn't a soul there, and I could just breathe in the entire beauty of that church and the spirituality of the church. I'd just sit there by myself. I said, "I'm being selfish, but I'm enjoying all this."

I'd watch slowly as the Altar Guild members came in and prepared the altar and then watch them light the candles. Sometimes they'd have an awful time lighting those candles way up there. As Betsy said, that church just engulfs you in the spirituality of the beauty.

Christ Church has become such an integral part of Georgetown and we think of Christ Church and Georgetown as one in the same sometimes. It really has been a beautiful experience to be involved in that church as well as the people that we've met and the friendships and everything.

Page: That is a perfect note to end on. I can't improve upon that. What an honor to spend this time with you all. Thank you so much.

Betsy: Thank you for listening to all of this.

[laughter]