

Lebanon Valley College®



Voices of Lebanon Valley College
150th Anniversary Oral History Project

Lebanon Valley College Archives—Vernon and Doris Bishop Library

Oral History of

J. Dennis “Denny” Williams

Honorary Doctorate 1990

Board of Trustees *Emeritus*

Date: January 23, 2014

Interviewed by Art Ford

Professor *Emeritus* and Alumnus, Class of 1959

Transcribed by Jananne Ferrere

Vernon and Doris Bishop Library Student Worker and Alumnus, Class of 2015

Notice: This is a transcript of an audio recorded interview conducted for the Lebanon Valley College Archives – Vernon and Doris Bishop Library. A draft of this transcript was edited and some corrections were made; therefore, the reader should remember that this is essentially a transcript of the spoken word, rather than the written word.

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Rev. Dr. J. Dennis “Denny” Williams H’90, Board of Trustees *Emeritus*—During a lifetime of service to the United Methodist Church, Rev. Williams joined the Board of Trustees in 1976, retiring in 2006. He recently wrote a history of Lebanon Valley College as part of the 150th commemoration of the founding of the College. He received an honorary doctor of divinity degree from the College in 1990.

A: I'm Art Ford and I'm here with Dennis Williams, Denny Williams. We'll be talking about the College and his relationship to it, in a variety of different ways, but primarily as a member of the Board of Trustees. It's now January 23, 2014 and we're in the Bishop Library of Lebanon Valley College. So Denny, let me begin with some factual questions about your background and that sort of thing. What was your hometown?

D: I grew up in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia, which is a tough part of town; by the river.

A: Was it tough when you were there?

D: Yes, it was. It was a factory neighborhood, where you had factories like Philco, etc. and people would work in the factory and college was not an option.

A: What was your father like?

D: My dad worked in a printing company—he was a cutter, and he cut labels—he was a label cutter, actually. He worked his way up until he was in charge of production.

A: And how about your mother; did she work or was she at home?

D: She was at home. She graduated number one in her class from high school, but college education wasn't something that was an option for women back then in that neighborhood.

A: So she never went to college?

D: No. She stayed at home.

A: So the entire time you were growing up, you were with your mother?

D: Yes.

A: OK. Do you have any siblings?

D: No—an only child.

A: Did you feel like a “privileged child” when you were growing up since you were an only child?

D: Not necessarily privileged, but it was fine—I had a lot of friends, so I never felt isolated.

A: OK. What high school did you attend?

D: I went to Frankfort High School, which was in Philadelphia.

A: What year did you graduate?

D: (long pause) (laughing)—

A: Sounds like I stumped you.

D: Yes.

A: Early '50s?

D: It was probably—I think I graduated from Seminary in '58—go back... probably around '52 maybe? Sometime around there.

A: You haven't been back to a high school reunion lately then I guess?

D: I went back for the 50th. I went back to the 20th.

A: What kind of extracurricular activities did you have in high school? What were you involved in?

D: I played some basketball, though not for my high school. I was very active in a group called the “13 Club”—who were 13 seniors. To be in that group, you had to have a certain scholastic average, participated in school events; I was in that. So I would say I played a little basketball and was part of the “13 Club” in my high school years.

A: Were you involved with religious organizations back then?

D: Yes, I was involved with something called “Christian Endeavor,” which was an ecumenical body in those days. I was pretty active. I was president of the group in Northeast Philadelphia.

A: Were you active in any writing, such as the newspaper; stuff like that?

D: No. I was—I played basketball (laughing).

A: I talked to other players in Philadelphia, high school players and they said that was their major high point in high school. Spent all of their time in the gym.

D: Yes. I was more—I played more in AAU-like leagues. I played in some of the city leagues—the summer leagues. The church that I attended had its own basketball team. We had a gym and we played basketball and I—I was very involved with that. I was involved in scouting. I was an Eagle Scout. I had a lot of fun as a kid.

A: Was your church a United Methodist Church?

D: Yes.

A: What was it called in that time?

D: Back then it was a Methodist Church.

A: Let’s move on to college then—where did you go to college?

D: Went to Temple—majored in philosophy.

A: Were you thinking of pre-ministerial at that time?

D: Actually, that’s an interesting—I became near the end of my high school period the resident agnostic in our group. I came from a very conservative Methodist church—and on one particular occasion, the minister was telling a story about Adam and Eve and then opened it up for questions. I asked the question, ‘You mean to tell me that all of us are in trouble because someone else did something wrong? That doesn’t seem very fair to me.’ And I also said, ‘If I’m

trying to understand the Adam and Eve story literally, where did all of these kids come from?’— sort of the incest issue. The minister’s response was, ‘It’s in the Bible and you just believe it.’ I found it very difficult if I couldn’t bring my mind to my faith; that I couldn’t bring all of me. So I kind of got turned off at that point. But in college, in our philosophy department, we had a professor by the name of Dr. Fisher, who really introduced me to a different way of looking at the Bible. And that changed everything for me. So I became open to what should I do vocationally? It’s obvious that an engineer wasn’t a good path for me. It ought to be something involving my mind and my enjoyment of people and my liking, to speak. So maybe a lawyer or be a philosophy professor? Or maybe be a minister? I was able to get a student appointment—to just see if that was an area that was comfortable to me. What happened was I felt that was where I needed to be. It felt right. So I felt no great call from something up high. It was something more pragmatic than that. So I became in the clergy.

A: Where did you go to seminary?

D: I did my undergraduate—or my (unintelligible) at Temple—at that point, they had a seminary. It was a nondenominational school. We had some pretty sharp professors. I was in the last class of that seminary. What happened was the seminary—the college decided instead of having a theological school, they were going to have a graduate department of religion. So many of the professors in the divinity school, became part of the graduate school.

A: Were you involved in other activities while in undergraduate at Temple?

D: No, I was basically a commuting student. I went to Temple because they offered me the best scholarship. My family had not thought of me going to college; that was not part of the agenda

and the culture that I grew up in. There was no money saved, so going to Temple and living at home, I was able to do it and work, and graduate without having student debt.

A: Let's move on to—let me stay with your non-Lebanon Valley College life for just a minute here. You married and your wife's name is?

D: Lenore.

A: Did you have any children?

D: Yes, we have two daughters.

A: OK. Any grandchildren?

D: Seven grandchildren.

A: Very good. Obviously your entire career was working with the Methodist Church?

D: Yes.

A: And when did you retire from there?

D: Let's see when did I retire... This is 2014... (Long pause) I've been retired... Let's see we lived in Cornwall in '62... I've been retired for 17 years.

A: OK. Let's move on to your involvement with Lebanon Valley College. When did that start?

D: It started in 1976, when I became a trustee as an accident. In those days, there was a thing called "Church Trustees" and they were elected by the Annual Conference to the board.

Normally, that was done with the agreement that the president of the College helped shape whoever was going to be proposed for the board. One of the persons on the 1976—when I came onto the board—was to be a member of the Annual Conference was Mark Hostetter, but Mark that year went on to the Committee on Finance of the Annual Conference. The rule of the Annual Conference was that if you served on that committee, you cannot be on the board of an

agency that received funding from the Annual Conference. So, Mark had to make a decision. It was a spur of the moment when that brought everyone's attention on the floor. He decided that he was going to serve on the Committee of Commission on Finance. Suddenly, there was an opening and Fred Sample, who always attended the annual conference, for some reason wasn't there at that point. And so, suddenly there is this opening and we were about to pass the nomination report with the trustees of the conference. So, people began to suggest names from the floor, which was unheard of. The person seated next to me was a friend, who happened to be on the administration at Albright and he said, 'Denny, I propose you. You would be good.' So he suggested me and put my name in nomination. We had a ballot and there were five of us and I won, so I became a trustee in 1976, unseen by the administration.

A: So you might have been the first one?

D: Yes.

A: So you served on the board for a number of years?

D: Yes—from 1976 and on. Until I became *emeritus* status.

A: When did that happen?

D: I think I was 70. You can't be elected to a term when you're over 70. So I think I was elected—my last election was at 69. When I was 72, I went into—became a trustee *emeritus*.

A: Was that the first time you were on campus then?

D: I had never been on campus before.

A: What was your immediate reaction to the campus physically when you arrived, do you remember?

D: Well, having gone to Temple, I found that it was certainly much more intimate. I wasn't particularly impressed by the campus, but it was very nice.

A: The physical presence of campus?

D: Yes.

A: The appearance?

D: Yes. It was OK. I had been on campus because the Conference was here sometimes. My previous comment is not correct. But it had nothing to do with the becoming's of the College. That was new to me. I think part of the reason why I stayed so long as a trustee was because I fell in love with the school—and that was because I found it somewhat exciting to be somewhere that was different from my area or function—that is to say that I met people from different walks of life. You can become quite parochial—if you only had tunnel vision for the setting in which you work. Working with the College expanded my vision of things. There was a sense that beginning in Lebanon Valley College at 1976 was a gift to me.

A: What committees did you serve on? Probably a number of them.

D: Yes.

A: Any favorites?

D: I remember serving on—until the committee was liquidated under John Synodinos—I served on the Committee on Student Affairs, and chaired that. I chaired a committee that dealt with college relations and involved a statement—I remember being invited to present that to the faculty and at one point feeling that I was Daniel in the den of lions—it was an interesting experience—I did that. I was on the Executive Committee. I chaired the Nominations Committee. I served for a good many years on strategic planning.

A: Which was the most rewarding for you?

D: (long pause) I think it was the Nominations Committee at the time because I was on that committee we did the downsizing and so...

A: That was under Synodinos?

D: That was under John Synodinos. Up until that time, we had a board that—I think it was at the time of the downsizing—we had 59 active trustees. You had—half of them were trustees from the conference—and then you had trustees from faculty—and you had trustees from the student body. What you had was a group of trustees who saw themselves more as representatives of constituencies, rather than representatives of the College as a whole. John was quite bright in that he saw that there needed to be a change, but his style of doing that was not shoving down people's throat, but he brought in the Nominating Committee, he brought in consultants that worked with the board as a whole—it came as something that as an entire body, we saw it was what we needed to do. Then the difficult part was the actual downsizing. We eliminated representatives from constituencies.

A: By constituencies, you mean members of the church?

D: Yes—or even faculty. That didn't mean—what didn't happen was we might have had people that came out of those arenas, but they saw themselves as trustees at large now.

A: So they were not in the Conference anymore? Did the Conference make any suggestions?

D: They could—but basically it was named by the board and the Nominating Committee. For example, when we did the downsizing—and that went very well and most people were really happy about it—but for example, we had all of these church representatives and half of them were clergy—and when we finished the downsizing, there was one representative from the

clergy from the Central Penn Conference, which is now the Susquehanna Conference—and one clergy from the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference and so I had—John had me calling some of these folk about what was going to happen, and most of the people were very gracious about it. Though, I must confess that I felt a bit awkward that I was going to be the one clergy from the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference (laughing). But I think that I see that as meaningful because that was a decision that needed to be made and I think that facilitated a much stronger Board of Trustees, which was needed. So I would say that my terms—I had several terms on the Nomination Committee—though, I enjoyed all of the committees that I served on.

A: Well, that downsizing had to be one of the most interesting aspects of your career as a trustee. Were there other moments during that career that stand out in your mind? Either in a positive or negative way-as important?

D: (long pause) Yes. I think John Synodinos becoming the president of the College was a watershed moment. And that was an outstanding moment for me. The College was in a difficult situation at that point and some of us weren't sure we were going to make it. So when he came, we stopped for a moment.

A: What made you think you wouldn't make it?

D: Enrollment was decreasing—at a pretty steady rate reflected a decrease in children that were college age in the area—and if we continued to decrease at the same rate as the population of college-age students was, we were going to reach a place in an economic scare. You wouldn't be able to make it. So I think the hiring of John became a watershed moment in the...

A: Now why is that?

D: Because he set in motion, at least for me—I guess I would call it a “threefold program”—one was the increasing of students through a rather novel student aid package, though he was a slow convert to that—he was against that when he first came, but John changed his mind.

A: Whose idea was it originally? Any one person?

D: Well what I do know is that Greg Stanson and Bill Brown were invited in by John to share this new idea he had and John Synodinos who had a new idea every day. He just did! This was his latest new idea, and as Greg and Bill tell it, they fell off their seat with laughter, because they had mentioned this to John when he first came. His reaction was, ‘now it’s only for fine students; done by merit.’ This wasn’t about faith. But, he stressed that we need to increase enrollment. He saw that his view was contingent on some things. Two, the grounds need to be more attractive—we needed to make our grounds more attractive. Three, we need to initiate academic programs that will meet real needs—deal with the quality of programs. He began us in a direction in which I think that David Pollick just continued it. To my thinking, Steve MacDonald brought it to the grand conclusion, which is also my way of saying that we are now in a place that we are re-visioning—building on the cold foundation that we have—re-visioning how we move forward. So John was watershed for me because there was a chance that we might make it. Another watershed moment for me was a trustee meeting we had prior to John’s coming, when Fred Sample was still president. Fred was a wonderful colleague—loves this College—served it for a good many years. But near the end of his serving, we were definitely going down and there needed to be a change and there was a difficult trustee meeting that we had in which some of this was surfaced. Fred was then—how should I put this—Fred was—had the support of the board to continue—but it was obvious at that meeting that

there needed to be some changes. A little while later Fred decided that he completed what he had set out to do and it was time to resign. That was a very difficult board meeting and I remember after it Pete Strickler coming to me and saying, 'Denny let's get together—I don't understand why you would take the position you did.' So he and I did that and I respected him. It was a memorable work. So that meeting was a water shed event for me.

A: So there's still maybe two presidents between Sample and Synodinos?

D: Let's see... After Fred was Art Peterson.

A: He was in that time period, yes.

D: I think Art was the only one after Fred. There were some acting presidents for a time, but you're basically an acting president to tread water in preparation for whoever is coming. Art Peterson was there for a short time and he had this shtick of Leadership College. But he was only president for three years at the most.

A: Probably.

D: That was probably a pretty good transition, which means we were ready for John. But, it was hard for us to find somebody because the College was not in a good spot. So, it was hard to find someone we really wanted, and someone that really wanted to come here.

A: During your entire time, you interacted with the administration, of course at Lebanon Valley—other than with Sample and Synodinos, but how would you characterize the relationship between the Board of Trustees and the administration of the College?

D: Re-cast that question.

A: I'm interested in how the board worked with the administration or did not work with the administration—that working relationship and how that would have been? Do you think of yourself as part of the College?

D: One end or the other end, you did what the administration told you to do. In the beginning, back in the early days of the board, the board was so large and so unwieldy, the board members didn't really feel that they were stakeholders. The Executive Committee was the stakeholders. Everything was decided prior to your coming and you didn't have—the committees were not all that strong so that my only feeling was that trustees felt removed from what was really happening. With the downsizing, that changed because that meant that there were certain business items the trustees need to be involved in so we were small enough that everybody worked on some standing committee and could give their energies to it. There was the feeling that what you decided as what activity mattered; this was not all decided by any committee—so I think things began to change—it's even more changed today. I think the board is more involved—the board takes more time to look at the bigger issues and to discuss them so that it's not just you're receiving reports from committees that you say yay or nay to. Now you look at larger issues that now may be facing the College. We spend time looking at these bigger issues, which I think is different, has a different feel to it. It certainly means that the trustees are better informed than they used to be. And more effective. In terms of working with presidents and administration, I think the board feels very free to tell the administration when they don't like something, but the board is also very open to really weighing what administration feels—and weighs that very careful decision making.

A: Has that always been true or is this something very recent?

D: Well, there have been times (laughing) (long pause), for example in Fred's period, at the end of his administration, there was discontent and worry about the future of the College—which there was a confidence issue—relative to 'can this president take us to the next step?'

A: You can change it or not.

D: Oh, Lord. Oh, I can think of times, like during David Pollick's presidency, when David had an ability to not stay within budgets when he built things. This in turn created a sense of distrust within the Board of Trustees, which wasn't healthy for anyone. Yes, there are times where administration and trustees may not be on the same wave length—that's healthy. That helps to get balance.

A: Let me broaden this out a bit now. You've touched on a number of points there, but let's step back and look at the entire College, which you have stayed connected to after your retirement. Were there moments where you were most proud of the College? And the opposite of that? When you were least proud, or even embarrassed by the College? Or something that happened at the College?

D: I was most proud of the College when the council director of the Annual Conference and the conference treasurer came to the president of the College and said, 'Look, we are really having some difficulties in the Annual Conference—in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference—and we're not going to be able to continue giving money as we did in the past. We are only going to be able to give a token amount—and I think it is \$5,000.' They were afraid that John was really going to be angry at all of this and John's response was, 'I understand. How can the College help the Conference?' That for me, was a proud moment for this College. It also represented for me a moment that personified the different understanding between church and college and what it

involved. When I first came on the board, the church was like a “hovering parent”—and the College was like an “emerging but somewhat dependent child.” At that moment, it became crystal clear when John made that comment—the relationship was now between “two full-fledged adults.” And so that for me, was a very proud moment.

A: And that continues today?

D: Yes. Though, I would also say the College and the Conference have become “distant cousins”—who hardly talk. And part of that is because each has their own quasi-professional underpinnings—how do they come together? The other reason is because the church is preoccupied with its own issues. So the College is more interested in having a relationship with the church, than the church now is having it with the College—at least at the Annual Conference level. Because the Conference is absorbed with their own issues, institutions like colleges aren’t really on the horizon that much. That doesn’t mean that we aren’t church related—as I see it Wesley saw three ingredients of church-related colleges: 1) they would have a place at the table—the table of learning—for those whose families are marginalized from that table, 2) a vibrant religious life, and 3) that there be training for service to the larger world. And those were the three main ingredients of Wesley’s College and Kingswood School, in England, and I see all of those elements living and thriving on this campus. We have students who come to this College who are like me when I went to Temple—whose families never had any money to go to college before. There is a vibrant, religious life on this campus. Though the relationship is different, I still think it is pretty vibrant.

A: Just a few other questions. With your close involvement with the campus over the number of years—I’ll ask you-what does Lebanon Valley College mean to you?

D: (long pause) personally, it's been a place that's expanded my interests. It's a place where I have, since retirement, audited a course every fall—just to broaden my own thinking. It's a place—I receive great satisfaction from seeing this place develop as I've seen it develop in the last 35 years that I've been involved with it. I mean it's downright exciting. This is an alive institution that has offered quality academic experience and also has co-curricular activities that can really be expanding so to have a share in that—to have seen that develop over the years, is very rewarding—very rewarding and exciting to me.

A: I mentioned that this tape and transcript will be available to the College—this includes future generations, we hope. Someone sitting somewhere around here 200 years from now—what thoughts would you want them to have about Lebanon Valley College, beyond what you have already said—thinking to the distant future, looking back at this time?

D: (long pause) This is a College that was agile enough to be aware of the context of its time—to the needs of its students. Because it was agile it could adapt to them in ways that were meaningful in the present context. I think—I would hope that in the future we would be equally as agile, while at the same time maintaining the core of a liberal arts education.

A: Finally, you are just finishing up a history of the College. Have you finished that yet?

D: I'm done.

A: You're done? Tell us a little bit about this history. This will be available to people 200 years from now. Perhaps your experience of writing the history?

D: I spent a lot of time in the archives—a lot of time in the archives reading minutes of board meetings, president's correspondence, conference journals, and all of that. That was kind of fun. I learned a lot that I didn't know. For example, I didn't realize how opposed to higher

education that some of the church fathers in the United Brethren In Christ Church were—unfavorable they looked at higher education. I found that some were opposed to high education as promoting worldliness. But there were others who had children that were going to other nondenominational schools—not staying United Brethren in Christ. So, you had these two contrary poles—finally, they were going to go ahead with this. There were road blocks. A joint committee was formed of the East Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Conference that was to make a recommendation as to where this college was to be founded—to be a coed school. But the chairman of the committee was from the Pennsylvania Conference, which is Central Pennsylvania and west of the Susquehanna with someone else they bought a college called Cottage Hill College in York. That was to be a college for women. They wanted East Pennsylvania Conference to start a college that would be a college for men. And the Pennsylvania Conference actually said, ‘We will not support any college that is coed.’ But, the East Pennsylvania Conference on its own plunged on ahead—the Annville Academy became available to them, where the College started in Annville. There were still forces that were opposed to this—Bishop Russell—who was really against this. Matter of fact, he came and preached at the College church, and his text was ‘knowledge puffed up.’ And [Thomas Rhys] Vickroy told us that the College enrollment went down 20 percent after what he got done. There was this antagonism. I found in the archives something called a confidential circular—it was circulated the first year after the College was founded in the Annual Conference. They were trying to sell the College still to the Conference. In it, it said basically, ‘If you support this College, we will provide per student per annum to the Conference between nine and 17 dollars per student.’ So, they sold it to the Annual Conference and got the Annual Conference to

continue the College because the Conference thought of it as a “cash cow.” There were things like this that I discovered. Tony Neidig gave me something that had been sticking in his craw for years—it was a notice that was during the Second World War. During the Second World War, there was a shortage of male students. The program was accelerated so that these male students who were enrolled before they were taken by the draft could get more class time in. In the accelerated program, Lynch decided they were going to have classes on New Year’s Day. The students New Year’s Eve jimmed all the locks so that you couldn’t get into the Administration Building and into Lynch’s office and he was evidently very upset. So, he posted this notice and the notice said, ‘There are saboteurs on our campus, who are unpatriotic and are harming the war effort. They need to come forward so that they can be expelled and people need to tell me who they are—who these saboteurs are. And if that doesn’t happen, the gym will be closed during the whole semester for any social events.’ And the gym was closed that semester for all social events (laughing). The rumor—at least as Tony told it to me—was that it was some leaders of the student body of all of the organizations that had done this. But, you found funny things like that had occurred which I knew nothing about.

A: Did you say you were finished now? What’s the publication date?

D: Yes.

A: I think it is part of the 150th Anniversary?

D: Probably going to come out the year before. And how they are going to do it is there will be a certain amount that are bound—maybe a couple hundred—and those will go to donors and people of that nature—and will sell any that people want to buy. But, it’s also going to be—at least as they tell me—through Amazon and you can buy through Amazon—they will bound it

for you. Also on Kindle. That way there is no large capital expenditure by the College, which makes good sense.

A: So it's that print on demand technology.

D: That's correct. There will be a certain number of bound copies that will go to certain people.

A: And if there's a demand for more, they can easily order it?

D: Yes.

A: Obviously, this was an enjoyable experience for you.

D: Yes, it was. But I'd rather it be done (both laughing). For me, it was kind of a labor of love.

I'm not in the position that I could give as much money to the College as I would like. I don't have those means, but this is something that I could give. I'm glad to do it.

A: Well, good. Thank you very much, Denny. It was a fascinating time.

D: You're very welcome.