

Life, Love and Legacy

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.

The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. is a man of faith, a homiletic genius, a theological scholar and a pastor's pastor. He is a family man who enjoys spending quality time with his wife, children, grandchildren, extended family and friends.

Steeped in Family Tradition and Educational Achievements

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Dr. Wright is a son of the parsonage and hails from a family steeped in educational achievements. A third generation family member to matriculate at Virginia Union University, Dr. Wright followed in the footsteps of his maternal grandfather, Dr. Hamilton Martin Henderson who graduated from Virginia Union with a Bachelor of Arts degree in the late 1800s and finished seminary at Virginia Union in 1902. His father, Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Sr., also graduated from Virginia Union with two undergraduate degrees and from the seminary with a Master of Divinity degree in 1938. The senior Wright also received a Master of Sacred Theology degree (S.T.M.) from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

Dr. Wright's mother, Dr. Mary Henderson Wright, also graduated from Virginia Union and earned her first master's degree before age 19 from the University of Chicago. She also earned a second master's degree and her doctorate in education from the University of Pennsylvania.

Foundational Strengths

With four earned degrees, a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in English from Howard University, a Master of Divinity from the University of Chicago Divinity School and a Doctor of Ministry from the United Theological Seminary, Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. grew up in a home where reading books was a daily way of life. Wright read a wide range of sources from the Greek philosophers and Shakespeare to African American authors such as Carter G. Woodson (the Father of African American History) to Sterling Brown (one of the Harlem Renaissance artists), as well as one of Dr. Wright's college professors.

A student of Black Sacred Music, ethnomusicology and African Diasporan studies, Dr. Wright is trained as an historian of religions. He came from a family where diverse ideas were discussed and lessons were learned. In that context, his faith was formed and his commitment to the continent of Africa and social justice were born. These foundational strengths shaped Dr. Wright's vision for prophetic ministry.

Pastoral Ministry

As senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, IL, where he served 36 years, Dr. Wright combined his studies of African Traditional Religions, African music, African American music and the African American Religious Tradition with his studies of Judeo-Christian thought to create ministries which addressed the needs of the community and enriched the lives and faith of his congregants by moving ministry, as stated in his own words, “from theory to praxis.”

Dr. Wright said in a published article: *“I have tried to bring those two different worlds together [the academy and the pew] in the context of pastoral ministry in an effort to move an ignored people from hurt to healing and from hate to hope. My mission at Trinity has been to bring those worlds together by using the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the life of Christ as a model for what is possible, of what might be, and of what our faith really is—‘the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.’”*

Dr. Wright’s efforts made Trinity - long considered, in theological circles, a model for the Black church - one of the most politically active and socially conscious churches in the nation. When he retired the church had over 50 active ministries with social justice advocacy at the core of its theological perspective.

From HIV/AIDS outreach programs and two senior housing complexes, to a federally funded childcare program for low-income families and the church’s newly formed Kwame Nkrumah Academy to serve students on Chicago’s South Side, the congregation has put into practice the Gospel that was preached every week.

Commitment to Education

As a result of Rev. Wright’s commitment to higher education, Trinity has provided scholarships for graduating high school seniors since 1977. Over 1000 students have been recipients of these scholarship awards and have finished both college and graduate schools. Over the past several years, the amount of scholarships awarded each year has been over \$100,000 a year.

In addition to the scholarship awards, the congregation has ordained 40 seminary graduates under Pastor Wright’s leadership and currently has over 30 members of the church who are students in fully ACT-accredited seminaries, working on their Master of Divinity degrees as they prepare for full-time service to the church of Jesus Christ. The congregation gives in excess of \$250,000 a year in theological education reimbursements to augment the seminarians’ efforts to acquire those degrees. The M.Div. is required for ordination for ministry in the United Church of Christ.

The Connection

In an effort to help his congregation make the connection between their faith, history and heritage, Dr. Wright led study tours each year for 15 years while he was pastor. Those tours took African Americans to Africa, the Caribbean and Brazil to learn more about their past, the Bible and the role of Africans in the history of Christianity and the history of the development of the cultures in the Colonial Diaspora. He still leads tours as Pastor Emeritus.

He also led the congregation of Trinity United Church of Christ to support mission work around the world. In addition to the church sponsored special mission projects in Ghana, Ethiopia, South Africa and Bahia, each year the congregation gives more than \$200,000 to the denomination's Mission work.

Dr. Wright also led the congregation to be strongly committed to ministry and mission work in the Continental United States above and beyond its ongoing denominational commitments. In the aftermath of hurricanes Rita and Katrina, for example, the church gave \$100,000 to the United Church of Christ's denominational effort to help with the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast region and they also gave an additional \$100,000 to help with the restoration of Dillard University, an HBCU started by the denomination immediately following the Civil War.

Scholarship

Following in the path of his mentor, Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, the legendary preacher of Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, Dr. Wright has taught hundreds of young seminarians the art of preaching and how to examine the Gospel and make it relevant to the listener.

Dr. Wright has authored numerous articles for academic journals and has published four books widely used in seminaries: *What Makes You So Strong?*, *Good News: Sermons of Hope For Today's Families*, *Africans Who Shaped our Faith* and *When Black Men Stand Up For God*.

A Model to Emulate

Each Sunday, churches from around the country and from various denominations visit Trinity. When Dr. Wright was serving as pastor, they came to hear him preach and to experience a worship service that feeds both the intellect and the soul, and both the "head and the heart," to use the words of Howard Thurman.

Describing Dr. Wright's preaching style, Rev. Otis Moss III, the pastor of Trinity and Dr. Wright's successor, says, "The weight of the holy is upon his words."

For all of Wright's work and contributions to Trinity and the global church community, he has received numerous awards, commendations and appointments, including eight honorary doctorates, the most recent from Lincoln University. He has served on a variety of boards, including the Amistad Commission of the State of Illinois, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Commission of the State of Illinois (appointed to both Commissions by the Governor of Illinois), and he continues to serve on the Board of Trustees of Virginia Union University, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Pastor's Conference and the Kwame Nkrumah Academy.

The Continuation

At the end of May 2008, Dr. Wright retired as senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ. He became Pastor Emeritus and now spends his time preaching, teaching, leading study tours to Africa, Brazil and the Caribbean.

Dr. Wright is married to the Rev. Ramah Wright and has five children, Janet, Jeri, Nathan, Nikol and Jamila; and three grandchildren, Jeremiah, Jazmin and Steven.