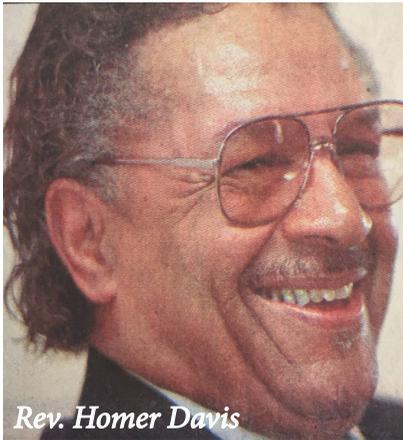


Rev. Homer Davis:

Our Champion for Diversity, Equity and Race Relations

By Felica Wooten Williams, PhD



Rev. Homer Davis

Rev. Homer Davis is a man who needs no introduction in the West Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church. Generally described as an outstanding preacher, teacher, leader and friend, Rev. Davis

literally stands out in a crowd. When you see him, you immediately recognize him as a true servant of God. When he speaks, his distinguished voice marks him as one who carries God's voice to the church, the community, and the world. This is the case whether he's in the pulpit, at the table of grace or sitting casually in a chair with family and friends. As I sat there with him on a cold and rainy Saturday afternoon, we watched the Georgetown Hoyas race around the basketball court to beat the University Connecticut by a narrow margin of 71 to 69 and I thought about the varied maneuvers that Rev. Davis must have made in becoming the tower of strength that he is today. I continued to ponder this notion and decided to ask some of his long-term colleagues about the ministry, the work and the legacy of this man: Rev. Homer Davis.

THE MAN

Felica Wooten Williams (FWW): How would you describe Rev. Homer Davis? What should everyone know about his personality and his character?

Bishop William Boyd Grove (WBG): Homer Davis is a moral and spiritual giant. Homer's work challenges us, encourages us and holds us accountable on issues of full inclusion in ministry in our conference. Mary Lou and I consider him and his late wife Pearl to be dear personal friends.

William H. Wilson (WHW): Homer Davis has always been the model for me of taking up the challenge, and being honest and blunt to challenge any system that oppresses, discriminates, and does not respect the rights of the poor and marginalized.

John F. Lacaria (JFL): Homer is an excellent preacher, advisor, and leader. We have spent many years working together in this conference. My mother, Ann Lacaria, and Pearl Davis were good friends. During the time that I volunteered in the tutoring program that worked out of Simpson Memorial UMC, I would often run into Pearl who always had very kind words to share and send to my mother; the memories of their relationship, formed through UMW and Church Women United, is precious to me. Everyone needs to know that Homer is an avid golfer. I got to vicariously know Rev. Homer Davis as golfer. He brought the full force of ministry to the game of golf, and it is no wonder that some consider the game a sacred institution.

FWW: That reminds me of something that that Rev. Bill Deel once said as he thought about his friend. He said, "Homer was my DS when I was at First UMC in South Charleston and he was Vice Chair of CFA when I was Conference Treasurer. He also beat me like a drum when playing golf."

THE MINISTRY

FWW: What are your most poignant memories of his ministry?

WHW: As I was challenged by the truth expressed by Rev. Homer Davis over the years, I have been also inspired by the pastoral spirit he exemplifies. During my first appointment after seminary 1976-1982 I continued to be influenced, and challenged as a United Methodist pastor by the leadership and learnings from Homer Davis.

Hearing him in presentations, and sermons, and in various meetings challenged me to confront my experience of white privilege, subtle habits of personal racism & prejudice, as well as encouragement to be bold and courageous in confronting the institutional racism in the Church.

JFL: Homer was my DS, and I served on the district Committee on Ordained Ministry near the end of his superintendency. Together we examined the call and capacity of people pursuing ministry. Homer brought a depth of knowledge and vision of the future that helped guide us on a path that valued inclusion and diversity. He also advised me wisely when, as director of youth ministries for the conference, we sought to address the lack of diversity in conference youth events.

THE WORKER

FWW: How would you describe his work in the WV Conference?

WBG: I became Presiding Bishop of the WV Conference in September of 1980. Homer Davis was a member of the Conference staff when I arrived. Two years later, in 1982, when I named four new District Superintendents, among them were Homer Davis an African American, and Ellen Carter, the first woman to be named to the bishop's cabinet in WV. I do not think he was the first African American superintendent but I am not sure. I think Ramsey Bridges was a DS but I am not sure. If not Homer was the first. I appointed him to the Charleston [now Midland South] district.

He had a distinguished ministry in government related civil rights work before coming onto the conference staff and cabinet. That record is listed in his bio in the Conference Journal. As Homer came on to the cabinet, we were at work on a program to yoke African American Churches to white churches, and appointing African American pastors to those charges. This was to achieve two purposes; 1] to give leadership and support to small black churches, and 2] to help white churches to have the experience of

having a black pastor. We recruited black pastors from beyond the conference to serve these charges. Nat Turner Lacey was one who was recruited in this initiative. Homer was the primary leader of this effort within the cabinet and within the conference. He was a very effective superintendent. His relationship with [white] cabinet colleagues was superb. We had a very close and deeply spiritual cabinet relationship in those years.

WHW: Rev. Homer Davis is a significant leader in the Annual Conference as conference staff (1979-1982) and District Superintendent (1982-1988) during the episcopacy of Bishop William Boyd Grove.

I was a Student Pastor between 1968-1970 when I became aware of the appointment of Rev. Homer Davis as Minister of Reconciliation for the West Virginia Annual Conference of the new United Methodist Church. The General Conference mandated reconciliation in its theme – “A New Church for a New World.” The General Conference established The United Methodist Fund for Reconciliation which was to resource programming for dealing with alienation in church and society. The Fund to be raised in Annual Conferences challenged the new United Methodist Church to resource for social change, assist poor and minority people toward an achievement in self-determination, to make funds available for churches in low income areas (Conference Journal, 1970, pp. 223-228).

Rev. Homer Davis worked full-time in this effort and I realized that over the years I have been formed, informed and influenced by the leadership he gave in those years. As a young and new minister, beginning my life calling I was challenged and learned from him.

Homer worked tirelessly during that appointment to implement the concepts of the Fund for Reconciliation and challenging the structures of the new Church to raise the apportioned goal for the West Virginia Annual Conference of \$400,000. His efforts and the work of the conference leadership saw pledges of \$376,000.

The Fund for Reconciliation raised in West Virginia Annual Conference \$174,000. Ministries were funded in seventeen major projects in West Virginia and our conference contribution to the General Church fund for national projects.

He shared clearly with the Annual Conference session in 1970 these words – “after one year’s concerted effort to implement this purpose (The Fund for Reconciliation), it has become painfully apparent that new ministries do violence to old concepts, beliefs, and habits. We are not yet . . . a new creation; the old has (not) passed away, behold the new has (not) come.” This, despite the fact that “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. . .” (Annual Conference Journal, 1970, page 236).

JFL: My earliest memories are from his Civil Rights work in the late 60s and early 70s. I was a student at West Virginia Wesleyan College. My father, an accountant with Howell and Paterno, was the Conference Treasurer, and together with others like Ramsey Bridges, they would address matters of Civil Rights and racism at Annual Conference. One moment stands out where my father was challenged by Homer about matters of systemic racism and prejudice. My father stated that he was not prejudiced but Homer countered that this was not possible in light of the society that shaped us all. It was certainly not pleasant to see my father challenged, but Homer was stalwart, and fair. Watching on as the dialogue continued, I learned a bit more about race and self-examination as a member of the majority culture.

THE LEGACY

FWW: How did his work influence ministry today and for future generations of Methodists?

WHW: When the Annual Conference gathered in a Special Session in September 1980 under the leadership of newly assigned Bishop William Boyd Grove, Homer was serving as Associate Director, Conference Council on Ministries. An Ethnic Minority Local Church Task Force report had been tabled at the regular session in

June 1980. Significant to the report to the Special Session was the challenge of Homer Davis in his report regarding open itineracy. Homer reminded the conference that the General Conference had established “Developing and Strengthening the Ethnic Minority Local Church” as the missional priority for the 1981-1984 quadrennium. He told the Annual Conference Special Session in Charleston in September of 1980, “If the West Virginia Conference is to respond to that priority in faith, there must be a radical re-structuring of its agenda, a reassessment of its missionary thrust, and the adoption of . . . a plan to intentionally effectuate open itineracy in the appointment system (Conference Journal, 1980, p. 352).”

CONCLUSION

Clearly, Rev. Homer H. Davis has touched so many lives throughout his non-stop stellar career. He continues his work at Simpson Memorial United Methodist Church in Charleston where he started his faith journey at the age of eleven (circa 1934). In his time of reflection, JF Lacaria said, “Rev. Homer H. Davis is a preacher among preachers who approached his work with passion and bravery.” His concerns for diversity, equity, and race relations remain relevant today.

Thomasina Stewart summed it well when she observed, “Homer loves his family, he’s a critical thinker, and a very good preacher who loves The United Methodist Church (particularly Simpson). He has a good sense of humor and he doesn’t mince words when he has something to say. He is intellectually gifted and he takes time for prayerful thought before responding to questions or concerns. He seems to be well-respected by his peers. And yes, he is still handsome.” We are blessed to have Homer as our friend, colleague, and servant of Christ. Give thanks to God for Rev. Homer H. Davis.