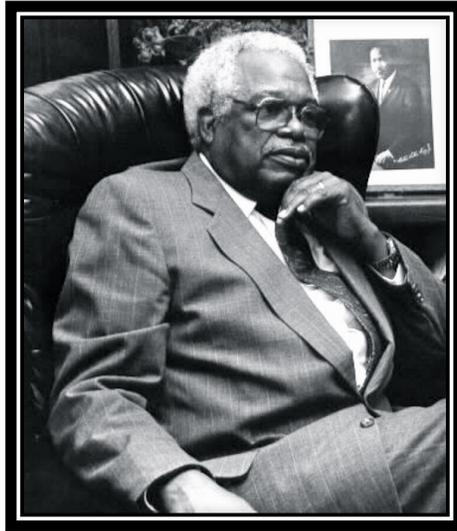


BIOGRAPHY OF CURTIS WEST HARRIS



Rev. Dr. Curtis West Harris was the last of six children born to the late Thelma and Sandy Harris on July 1, 1924 in Dendron, Virginia. He was raised in Hopewell, Virginia and educated in its public schools. After graduating from Carter G. Woodson High School, he continued his education at Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia and eventually employed at Allied Chemical in Hopewell. Other education experiences included obtaining a certificate in Clinical Training for Pastors from the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond, Virginia; studying at the Urban Training Center for Christian Missions in Chicago, Illinois; and completing various courses at Virginia State University in Petersburg, Virginia. Dr. Harris also received an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in 1972 and an Honorary Doctor of Law degree in 1983 from the Virginia University of Lynchburg in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Although Dr. Harris' childhood was spent in poverty, he was taught early in life, the value of sharing with the less fortunate. This sharing factor and the selflessness exemplified by his mother were pivotal to his entry into the ministry and to the role he selected to play in the protection of human rights.

In 1959, the late Dr. George W. King and Union Baptist Church in Hopewell ordained Dr. Harris into the ministry. He began his spiritual call at First Baptist Church, Bermuda Hundred in Chesterfield, Virginia where he was pastor for ten years. He also led the congregation at Gilfield Baptist Church, Ivor, Virginia for 33 years; and preached his last sermon as pastor of Union Baptist on Sunday, December 16, 2007 after 46 years as pastor. Dr. Harris is now Pastor Emeritus of Union Baptist.

Strong social, political, and religious consciousness led Dr. Harris to affiliate with and hold office in the following organizations: Hopewell Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *President*; Carter G. Woodson Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), *President*; Hopewell Ministerial Association, *Secretary/President*; Hopewell Improvement Association (HIA), *Vice President/President*; National Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), *Board of Directors/Vice President*; Virginia State Unit of

SCLC, *President*; Moses Life Insurance Association, *President*; Shiloh Masonic Lodge #33 (Prince Hall Affiliated), *Past Worshipful Master*; Union Baptist Sunday School, *Teacher/Superintendent*; Lily of the Valley Chapter #44 (Order of Eastern Star), *Past Worthy Patron*; Virginia State Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Vice Chairman*; Bethany Baptist Association and Allied Bodies, *Moderator*; Virginia State University Non-Boarding Students, *Counselor*; Virginia Council on Human Relations, *Director*; and Hopewell City Council, *Councilman/Vice Mayor/Mayor*.

The civil rights work of Dr. Harris began as early as 1950 when he was elected president of the Hopewell chapter of the NAACP. Ten years later, he was arrested and sentenced to 60 days in jail for his role in a sit-in at a segregated drugstore in Hopewell. In 1961, he became a member of the National SCLC Board of Directors, joined forces with the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and accepted nonviolence as the most practical means to fight racial and social injustice. He was arrested 13 times for acts of civil disobedience during his civil rights career.

Dr. Harris was cited for contempt by the Boatwright Committee of the Virginia General Assembly and accompanied to his trial by Dr. King in 1962. He witnessed the "I Have a Dream" speech at the *1963 March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs*, marched 50 miles from Selma to Montgomery to secure voting rights for Blacks in 1965, assisted in the coordination of the Poor People's Campaign in 1968, and beaten in Suffolk, VA during a peaceful protest in 1969. He was still battling in the war against injustice when he filed a discrimination complaint against Fort Lee, Virginia in 1996; and at the age of 83, Dr. Harris took to the streets in demonstration against the Hopewell City Council's proposal to build an ethanol plant in 2007.

By the 1960's, Dr. Harris had also taken an interest in local politics and ran seven times, unsuccessfully, for a seat on the Hopewell City Council. Finally, in 1983, he forced the city to switch from its longstanding at-large system to a ward system and became the second African American elected to the council. He became the city's second African American vice-mayor in 1996 and was sworn in as Hopewell's first African American mayor in 1998. On March 1, 2012, after 26 years of service to the city and to his constituents in Ward 2, Dr. Harris retired from his seat on the Hopewell City Council.

Ruth Jones Harris, his loving wife of 65 years, passed away on May 22, 2011. Dr. Harris now resides in Chester, VA with the support of his six children: Curtis, Jr. (Fayetteville, GA), Kenneth (Hopewell, VA), Michael (Ft. Washington, MD), Joanne (Virginia Beach, VA), Karen (Fayetteville, GA), and Michelle (Waldorf, MD). The Harris Connection, as the family proudly calls itself, also includes three daughter-in-laws, one son-in-law, 23 grandchildren, 32 great grandchildren, and three great-great grandchildren.

Curtis Harris has been deliberate, yet courageous in his life choices with a keen awareness of man's imperfections. The war-torn veteran can be described as one who possesses an open heart that is touched by the needs of all humanity. His tireless effort, humanitarian spirit, and unwavering determination are captured in the lyrics of his favorite Negro spiritual: *"If I can help somebody as I pass along; if I can cheer somebody with a word or a song. If I can show somebody they're traveling wrong; then my living shall not be in vain."*