



DREW MARTIN Staff photo

Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church Deacon Michael Major, left, bows his head as the Rev. Ben Williams prays on Aug. 20 after congregants were baptized in Skull Creek on Hilton Head Island.

RELIGION

Hilton Head's beloved Rev. Ben Williams dies

BY DAVID LAUDERDALE
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The Rev. Ben Williams, Hilton Head Island's senior pastor and most beloved person, died Monday at Hilton Head Hospital.

Williams, 78, had been senior pastor at Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church on Squire Pope Road for almost 42 years.

He was affectionately known as "The Rev," acting as the most visible bridge between the island's native Gullah community he married into and the white newcomers.

He was known for his oversized smile and laugh, booming voice, pulpit singing, long prayers and church services, and activism throughout the community.

When his church marked its 100th anniversary two years ago, Williams said, "The main focus is to keep these people together for a common cause and purpose. People need to understand the importance of believing and trusting in God."

His river baptisms were photographed by National Geographic magazine, and he once baptized boxer Sugar Ray Leonard in Skull Creek when he was training on Hilton Head for a fight with Roberto Duran. Leonard

bought robes for the youth choir and gave Williams a silver Lincoln Town Car with "THE REV" on the license tag.

Williams' contributions to the community were recognized many times. He received the Alice Glenn Doughtie Good Citizenship Award and was named Man of the Year by the Presbyterian Men of the Church.

Williams was retired from the Beaufort County School District. He started as a bus driver and became bus supervisor then attendance monitor. It was his suggestion to start an in-school suspension program to keep suspended students at school rather than turn them onto the

streets, and he counseled hundreds of students as a leader of the program.

His concern for children also showed at his church, which founded the Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Achievement School to prepare children for kindergarten and give them a basic Christian education. The church once had an after-school program for older students.

Williams helped Dr. Jack McConnell found the Volunteers in Medicine Clinic, with retired doctors offering free medical care to uninsured or underinsured Hilton Head and Daufuskie Island residents and workers.

He was a founder of the Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Committee.

His church opened its door to community gatherings, including NAACP meetings and meetings held by union leaders when they organized workers at a Daufuskie Island resort.

"The black church is the one

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institution that blacks have always had access to," Williams said, "and by that and with that, it handles all our community affairs."

He was a leader among pastors, often exchanging pulpits and preaching at community Good Friday events.

"We were truly brothers and friends," said the Rev. Greg Kronz of St. Luke's Church. "This is a tremendous loss to me, as well as to the island and his congregation and family."

Another veteran island pastor, the Rev. John M. Miller, said, "Everyone loved Ben Williams."

He was a regular at the former Island Clergy Council meetings and got along with everyone, Miller said.

"He was ecumenical, and whenever he was participating in an ecumenical service, we all knew it was going to be as long as Ben Williams determined it was going to be. We could be told we had 20 minutes to speak, but Ben Williams knew no time limits."

The Rev. Alvin Petty of First African Baptist Church said, "He was a pastor for pastors, who shares and who cares about his congregation and the congregations of others. So when you think of Hilton Head Island, you can't help but think of the Rev. Ben Williams. We love him truly, and we're going to miss his presence, his singing, his preaching and teaching. But God does what he does best."

The Rev. Charles E. Hamilton Sr. of St. James Baptist Church said, "The



JAY KARR Island Packet file photo

The Rev. Ben Williams, pastor of Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church, is shown Aug. 1, 2011, not long after celebrating his 36th anniversary as a preacher.

island has lost a great icon and a great man of God. He played a major role in my life. He has been more or less the standard bearer for all of us. A mentor. A father. He played a major role for all ministers on the island, not just African-American ministers. Everyone respected him, the way he carried himself and what he stood for — peace and inclusiveness."

Williams was a native of rural Warren County, N.C., who married a native islander he met in New York City, the late Elizabeth Patterson Williams. He was in New York attending seminary, and he was an assistant pastor there. His wife died in 1984. They had two children, Russell Williams of Hilton Head and Lucretia Williams Morris of the Orlando area.

Williams loved Hilton Head, calling it a "new Jerusalem." John Miller thought his experience in New York City prepared

him well to be a bridge builder on Hilton Head with its many retirees from the North.

Williams was a large man who came close to death from congestive heart failure in 2005. But he changed his diet, banned fried foods from the church kitchen, lost about 175 pounds and became an ambassador for healthier living.

Williams' last event at the church was the homecoming anniversary celebration in August. He had been a resident of the Preston Health Center at The Cypress since late August. He was admitted to Hilton Head Hospital two weeks ago and phoned in orders for the church as recently as Sunday.

Funeral services will be held at 2 p.m. Saturday at Hilton Head Presbyterian Church, 235 William Hilton Parkway, with his good friend the Rev. Kenneth C. Doe of Bethesda

Christian Fellowship on St. Helena Island delivering the eulogy. Burial will be in the Talbird Cemetery.

The family will receive friends from 6 to 8 p.m. Friday in the sanctuary of the Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church, 382 Squire Pope Road.

Marshel's Wright-Donaldson Home for Funerals is in charge of the arrangements.

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