

## **Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.**

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 VUU 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. His family laid a strong educational foundation for him and he has built upon that foundation all of his life.

With four earned degrees, a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in English from Howard University, a Master of Arts in The History of Religions 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 Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Carter G. Woodson (the Father of African American History) to Sterling Brown (one of the Harlem Renaissance artists).

As Providence would have it, moreover, Dr. Sterling Brown – one of the authors Dr. Wright read as a child -- ended up being both one of Dr. Wright's parent's college professors and also Dr. Wright's mentor when he attended Howard University.

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 in critical thinking were learned. In that context, his faith was formed and his commitment to the continent of Africa and to social justice was 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 was 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 through the founding of the church’s African Centered Charter School, the Kwame Nkrumah Academy, which serves students on Chicago’s South Side, the congregation of Trinity UCC has put into practice the Gospel that they heard preached every week for 36 years.

### ***Commitment to Education***

As a result of Rev. Wright’s commitment to higher education, when he was the pastor Trinity provided scholarships for graduating high school seniors every year from 1977 to 2008 when he retired. Over 1000 students were recipients of those scholarship awards during Wright’s pastorate and as a result those students have finished both college and graduate schools. Over the last 10 years of Wright’s pastorate, the amount of scholarships awarded each year was over \$100,000 a year.

In addition to the scholarship awards, the congregation ordained 42 seminary graduates under Pastor Wright’s leadership and at his retirement the congregation had over 30 members of the church who were students in fully ACT-accredited seminaries, working on their Master of Divinity degrees as they prepared for full-time service to the church of Jesus Christ. While Wright served as pastor, the congregation gave 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 Between Faith and History***

In an effort to help members of his congregation make the connection between their faith, their history and their heritage, Dr. Wright led study tours each year for 15 years while he was pastor and continued to do so for five additional years as Pastor Emeritus. Those tours took African Americans to Africa, to the Caribbean and to 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 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, while Wright was pastor the congregation gave 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 UCC 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 the church 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 pastor 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 with an African American hermeneutic and make it relevant to the listeners of all races. Dr. Wright has taught courses at the Garrett Evangelical Seminary, Catholic Theological Union and Chicago Theological Seminary. He has lectured at McCormick Theological Seminary and he has taught Intensives at Ashland Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Ohio and Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. He teaches an Intensive each year at The Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University where he is an adjunct faculty member.

Dr. Wright has authored numerous articles for academic journals and has published four books of sermons which are 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*. His fifth book *A Sankofa Moment: The History of Trinity United Church of Christ* is his first narrative work that is not a collection of sermons! It was published in February of 2010. One of his recent publications is a chapter on Ecclesiology in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*.

### ***A Model to Emulate***

For the last 20 years of Wright's pastorate, each Sunday, churches from around the country and from various denominations visited Trinity. When Dr. Wright was serving as pastor, they came to hear him preach and to experience a worship service that fed both the intellect and the soul, and both the "head and the heart," to use the words of Howard Thurman.

Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century "Dean of Black Preaching" in the United States of America and the Pastor Emeritus of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, New York, had this to say about the Pastor Emeritus of Trinity United Church of Christ and his impact nationally and internationally:

*"People who love the Lord and who embrace the noblest concepts of our democracy will enthusiastically applaud the establishment of the Reverend Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. Lectureship. The Lectureship appropriately salutes the Pastor and mentor who prepared President Barack Obama for the role of President of the United States.*

*"Mr. Obama had hardly any grasp of the meaning of being a Black person in the United States. By example and exhortation, Reverend Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., cured that deficiency, sending to Washington a President qualified to give America a chance to actually become a democracy!"*

Dr. Taylor sent those words of encouragement as the Center for African American Theological Studies in Chicago inaugurated its Annual Lecture Series in honor of the preaching and pastoral ministry of Reverend Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.

For all of Wright's work and contributions to Trinity and the global church community, he has received numerous awards, commendations and appointments, including nine honorary doctorates. 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), the Illinois State Treasurer's Community Affairs Advisory Council and the Governor's Commission on Capital Punishment.

He continues to serve on the Board of Trustees of Virginia Union University, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Pastors Conference, Inc. 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, lecturing and teaching seminary.

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

*For more information about The Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., D.Min., visit his Website, [www.JeremiahWright.com](http://www.JeremiahWright.com).*