

African American fellowship president values legacy

June 30, 2021

NEW YORK (BP)—The faith of his mother Sophia and grandmother Elizabeth play prominently in the faith journey of New York Pastor Frank Williams, beginning in his childhood in small Dieppe Bay Town in St. Kitts, West Indies.

“From the time he was conceived, I prayed to God for him,” his mother Sophia Williams said. “I made a bargain with God. I said, ‘God if you give me a healthy baby I promise you, I will give him back to you.’”



Sophia Williams and Elizabeth Glasford, the mother and grandmother of Frank Williams, respectively, are seated on the front row from left at Glasford’s 100th birthday celebration with Williams, his wife Tisha and their children. (Submitted photo)

A decade or so after they emigrated to the United States in the 1980s, she formed a prayer group at Wake Eden Community Baptist Church in the Bronx, N.Y.—one of two congregations Williams now serves as pastor—to pray solely for him, her only child.

Elizabeth Glasford, his grandmother, gave him a blue monogrammed Bible at about the same time, sensing he still loved the Lord, even as he suffered a brief season of declining interest in church. Two months later he surrendered to God.

“It was where his heart was,” said Glasford, who is now 104 years old and living in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. “It was leading towards the almighty God. And I wanted him to grow up a good young man.”

Frank Williams, now the senior pastor of both Wake Eden Community Baptist and Bronx Baptist Church, serves a group of more than 4,000 Black pastors as the new president of the National African American Fellowship of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Among women his mother enlisted to pray for him in his youth is Pauline Heslop, a medical doctor and women’s minister at Bronx Baptist Church, who would become his mother-in-law. Williams married her daughter Tisha in 2006. He and Tisha are parents to Timothy, Tiffany and Trinity.

Mentored by the ‘Bishop of the Bronx’

Williams was mentored by the late Samuel Simpson, a West Indian native who emigrated to the United States in the 1960s before founding the two congregations Williams now pastors. Simpson, who became known as the “Bishop of the Bronx,” is remembered in Southern Baptist life as a trailblazer in race relations who was also a leader in community outreach.

“He talked to me a lot about those experiences, the good and the bad, in

terms of Southern Baptists, because when I joined the church, I didn't know that it was Southern Baptist," Williams said. "It was later, years later, that I would come to understand the history of Southern Baptists and that we were a part of this congregation with this history."

He asked Simpson why he became Southern Baptist.

"He would talk to me about those years and some of the experiences he had, and how he navigated that," Williams said. "Let me give you a specific example. He would intentionally show up to meetings and encourage other Black pastors to be intentional about filling up meetings and being a Black presence in the room."

Simpson was among the top New York supporters of the Cooperative Program for funding Southern Baptist national and international work, and intentionally involved his church members in denominational activities.

'Legacy of presence, influence and purpose'

In the 1970s and 1980s, "when he walked in with his church members, many white people got up and left because they wouldn't want to pray with Blacks in the same room with them," Williams said. "But there were plenty of others who didn't—those who did greet them and did pray with them, and so forth."

Simpson's ministry of presence, Williams believes, helped mold him to lead NAAF at the current juncture of Southern Baptist life.

"It has helped me to understand that I am a part of a legacy of presence, influence and purpose within this denomination, that I'm not a Southern Baptist by chance," Williams said. "There is a purpose for this, and God is using many churches to help his body, the body of Christ, to help within

this denomination to grow out of the stigma of its racial past and the realities of the current racial bias that may still linger in some aspects of our denominational life.

“We are a part of the solution. That’s how I see that ... those stories. And these are people who I still know who went through that.”

Williams referenced deacons who shared stories of purposefully seeking Southern Baptist churches while on family summer vacations in the South, and visiting them unannounced.

“And they would tell me that some churches would be warm and welcoming, but there were plenty of experiences over those years where ushers wouldn’t greet them, people wouldn’t say anything and they would feel unwelcome and ostracized, and they would know it’s because they’re Blacks,” Williams said. “They would be the only Black people in that congregation that Sunday morning.”

‘Positive force within the SBC’

Marshal Ausberry, pastor of Antioch Baptist Church in Fairfax Station, Va., and NAAF immediate past president, commends Williams as his successor at the national fellowship.

“Frank will work well fulfilling the mission of NAAF as he works with SBC leadership and entity leaders,” Ausberry said. “Frank is a dedicated, positive force within the SBC who works cooperatively to reach the lost, plant churches and show the world that we love one another through Jesus Christ.”

Williams has exercised leadership within NAAF formerly as treasurer and vice president.

“Frank is very insightful in diagnosing issues and always sees things

through a biblical prism as he makes decisions that best represent Christ and live out the gospel,” Ausberry said.

Williams was ordained to the gospel ministry at Bronx Baptist Church in 2002, and has held both of his current pastorates since 2013. He was interim pastor at Wake Eden from April 2011 until March 2013, and assistant pastor at Bronx Baptist from February 2002 until June 2013.

He served 18 months as interim executive director of the Metropolitan New York Baptist Association, two years as chairperson of the group’s executive board, and participated in association prayer and youth ministry initiatives. He has served three terms on the Executive Board of the Baptist Convention of New York.

Involved in ministry and missions

Bronx Baptist and Wake Eden churches are active in ministry and missions including a Christian academy, a community enrichment center, food distributions, community housing development, economic development research for immigrants, prison ministry and nursing home outreaches.

Among church plants the two congregations have sponsored are Power Point Baptist Church and The Kenyan Fellowship in New Jersey, and A Better City Movement Church in the Bronx.

Williams serves New York as first vice president of the Clergy Coalition of the 47th Precinct, Inc. From 2005-2012 he was clergy liaison for the New York Police Department. The clergy coalition meets monthly with law enforcement to address community concerns, and has distributed more than \$134,000 in scholarships to nearly 500 youth through the Martin Luther King Community Service Award.

Williams said clergy have a responsibility to serve the community.

“The pastors are the shepherds of the community, not just their congregation,” he often tells clergy coalition members. “Jesus was a part of the community life. He would attend community events. He would engage people on a community level. He would engage them in the synagogue. He would engage them at feasts. He would go to their homes.

“This is how Jesus did ministry. And so for me, ministry is not just in the synagogue, in the church building. It has to be at feasts. It has to be on the streets. It has to be in the life of the community.”