

Race relations trailblazer Willie McPherson dies at age 80

May 18, 2020

WICHITA, Kan. (BP)—Willie Thomas McPherson, recognized as a trailblazer in Southern Baptist race relations and diversity, died May 12 in Wichita, Kan., at age 80.

McPherson was pastor of a predominantly white church in the 1970s in California and later was the first black divisional leader within the California Southern Baptist Convention.

“He was a wise counselor, a wise leader, that I think was unique, because you really needed somebody like that who had the ability to work within both cultures and bring both cultures together,” said Jay Wells, a retired LifeWay Christian Resources executive.

McPherson, a Mississippi native, enjoyed a decades-long career in Southern Baptist denominational work. In 1980, he became the first African American director of the California Southern Baptist Convention’s Black Church Extension Division.

He was one of the first African Americans to lead a national Southern Baptist denominational division, directing the newly named Black Church Extension Division of what is now the North American Mission Board from 1992 to 1997.

Dennis Mitchell, executive director of the National African American Fellowship of the SBC, said McPherson “paved the way for many African Americans to enter denominational service.”

“Bro. Willie, a man of uncompromising convictions and moral integrity, will

long be remembered for his unshakable faith in God, commitment to racial reconciliation, the work of Southern Baptists, knowledge of black history and his penchant for sharing stories from the past with both passion and humor," Mitchell said. "Dr. McPherson was a true generational denominational leader."

McPherson received many awards and recognitions for his work, including the NAMB Lifetime Achievement Award for Church Planting, and the Black Southern Baptist Denominational Servants Network 2009 Hall of Servanthood Award.

McPherson was a graduate of Golden Gate Theological Seminary (now Gateway Seminary), California Baptist College and Miracosta Junior College.

Survivors include his wife of 58 years, Frankie Owens McPherson.