THE ABYSSINIAN BAPTIST CHURCH

Celebrates

PASTOR’S MEMORIAL SUNDAY
Honoring Our Former Pastors

coordinated by The Adam Clayton Powell Memorial Ministry

In conjunction with The Archives & History Ministry

"I will give you pastors according to my heart,
and they shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.”
Jeremiah 3:15

Pastors' Memorial Sunday

Today, The Abyssinian Baptist Church proudly remembers three of our most prolific pastors in the history of this church: Rev. Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Congressman Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Rev. Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor.

REVEREND DR. ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, SR.

Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. was born on May 5, 1865 in Franklin County, VA, to a southern slave owner and Sallie (Dunning) Powell, a former slave. He was raised by his mother and stepfather, Anthony Powell, an ex-slave who instilled in him religious beliefs. In 1875 at age 10, Adam met Mattie Fletcher Schaffer in West Virginia. They married in 1887 and had two children, Blanche and Adam Jr. Adam Sr. originally sought to study law and politics, but decided to follow God’s call to preach the Gospel, and in 1888, entered Wayland Seminary, now Virginia Union University in Richmond, VA.

In 1892, Dr. Powell was called to pastor Immanuel Baptist Church in New Haven, CT, while a special student at Yale Divinity School. In December 1908, Rev. Powell Sr. was called to the pastorate of Abyssinian Baptist Church, then located on West 40th St. Under Adam Sr.’s leadership, in spring 1920, lots on West 138th Street in Harlem were purchased, and a tithing campaign was implemented. On April 9, 1922, ground was broken, construction began, and the new Abyssinian church edifice was completed in 14 months. The $60,000 construction debt was retired in less than five years by members who were committed to Rev. Powell's vision.

Dr. Powell was responsible for the building of the first community/recreational center in the most densely populated Black community in the world, making Abyssinian a model church. He went on to establish other social/religious education programs, and by the mid-1930’s, Powell Sr. was the powerful pastor of a church that boasted a membership of 14,000 which was recognized as one of the largest Protestant congregations in America.

During the Depression era, Powell, Sr. campaigned to feed the poor, and advocated for jobs and city services. He lectured on race relations at Colgate University, the College of the City of New York and Union Theological Seminary, among other institutions.
Additionally, Dr. Powell was a co-founder of the National Urban League, an early leader in the NAACP, and an organizer of the Silent Protest parade of 1928. Powell was a proponent for racial pride and believed in education and hard work. In 1937, he retired and turned the pastoral mantle of Abyssinian over to his son and Assistant Pastor, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. By this time, the church's loyal, tithing members were paying the operating expenses of the church, salaries of full and part-time church workers, and supporting a missionary effort in Africa. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. died in June 1953.

CONGRESSMAN REVEREND ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR.
Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was born on November 29, 1908 in New Haven, CT to Mattie Fletcher and Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. He attended the public schools of New York City, and later received degrees from Colgate University (Hamilton, NY) in 1930; Columbia University (New York, NY) in 1932; and Shaw University (Raleigh, NC) in 1934. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. succeeded his father as pastor in 1937. He previously served Abyssinian as Assistant Pastor and launched his career as a crusader for reform as Director of the church’s soup kitchen and relief operations that served thousands of Harlem’s needy during the Depression. In recognition of his outstanding work, Shaw University awarded him the Doctor of Divinity degree.

In 1930, Adam Jr. persuaded several large corporations to drop their “unofficial” ban on employing Blacks including Harlem Hospital, and New York City’s Bus Lines, which routinely discriminated against Blacks in their hiring practices. He was also instrumental in helping Blacks find employment along Harlem’s lucrative “125th Street.”

Adam Jr. was a dynamic leader who successfully combined the Christian message with a radical oratory of Black activism and politics. In 1944, he was elected Congressman of the 22nd District and served 14 terms in the House of Representatives. In 1945, Powell went to Washington, D.C. as the sole Congressional representative of a community of 300,000, of which 89% were African American. Identified as “Mr. Civil Rights,” and a freshman legislator, Powell was a firm believer in the importance of radical politics who actively engaged in fiery debates with arch-segregationists. On Capitol Hill, Powell managed federal legislation that generated public laws to benefit minorities, the aged and handicapped in areas of fair employment, public education, school aid, discrimination, increased minimum wage and poverty.

Throughout his career in Congress, Powell attended several conferences abroad as spokesman for the United States, including the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia (1955) and the independence of Ghana, West Africa (1957). During his dynamic pastoral leadership, Abyssinian maintained a firm membership of over 10,000 and was known as the “church of the masses.” Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. died on April 4, 1972.

REVEREND DR. SAMUEL DEWITT PROCTOR
Samuel DeWitt Proctor became Abyssinian’s pastor in 1972. Born and raised in Norfolk, VA, Dr. Proctor received degrees from Virginia Union University (Richmond, VA) in 1942, Crozer Theological Seminary (Rochester, NY) in 1945 and Boston University (Boston, MA) in 1950. He was ordained as a Minister of the Gospel in 1943, and went on to hold various posts in education, including Presidency of Virginia Union University, Richmond, VA in 1955, and North Carolina A & T State University in 1960. He held administrative positions with the National Council of Churches, the Peace Corps in Nigeria and Washington, D.C., and the Office of Economic Opportunity prior to becoming pastor of The Abyssinian Baptist Church.

Dr. Proctor was also a Professor of Education at Rutgers University (1969 -1984), and served on the board of Middlebury College as well as at other education institutions. A prolific educator, teacher and public servant, Dr. Proctor built on the legacy of both Powells with his powerful preaching of God’s word.

As a delegate to the national and international conferences on Human Rights and Peace, Dr. Proctor consistently condemned racism, militarism and injustice.

During his 17-year pastoral tenure, Abyssinian became a staunch supporter of global efforts that upheld the cause for social, educational and racial equality for all African Americans. Dr. Proctor retired from Abyssinian in 1989. He authored several books including “We Have This Ministry,” “How Shall They Hear,” “Sermons from the Black Pulpit,” and “The Substance of Things Hoped For,” among many others.

Reverend Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor passed away on May 22, 1997 in Cedar Rapids, IA. The Reverend Calvin O. Butts, III succeeded Dr. Proctor as the 19th Pastor of The Abyssinian Baptist Church in the City of New York.