



Lacey Kirk Williams

**Lacey Kirk Williams and  
S. Mattie Fisher:  
Serving the Lord and Man  
from Olivet Church**  
Victoria McAfee

*[May] God give us a thirst for Him, and power  
to find Him that He might unite our hearts  
and hands in the service of God and man.*

The Rev. Dr. Lacey Kirk Williams was loved, honored, and admired for his devotion to Christ and His Church. He and S. Mattie Fisher had a major impact on thousands of African Americans who migrated north during the early 1900s.

Williams was born July 11, 1871, in a cabin near Eufaula, Alabama, to former slaves Levi Shorter and Elizabeth Hill. When Lacey was six years old, Levi changed the family name to Williams and moved the family to Burleson County, Texas. At age 16, Lacey earned his teaching certificate in Waco, Texas. He returned to Burleson County where he taught school and married Georgia Lewis.

Soon after Williams made a profession of faith and was baptized, he was ordained and became pastor at Thankful Baptist Church in Pitt Bridge, Texas, a church his parents had founded.

Williams gained education so he could adequately teach God's people. In 1902, he enrolled at Bishop College, in Marshall, Texas. While still a student, he pastored Bethesda Church. In 1913, he received a B.A. degree from Arkansas Baptist College and then an honorary D.D. degree from Selma University in Alabama in 1914.

Between 1916 and 1919, thousands of people of color migrated from the South to the North in search of jobs. Many settled on the south side of Chicago, swelling the African-American population in that area from 44,000 to an estimated 109,000.

In 1916, Williams left Texas to pastor Olivet Baptist Church in south Chicago. Church membership rose to over 4,000 in Williams's first five years as pastor, due in part to his eloquent preaching, excellent leadership skills, and the outreach ministries of the church.

"Olivet" became a byword for help among those who planned to migrate north. The church received hundreds of letters addressed to "Oliver," "Ovlivet," or just Olivet for help with bus or train passes. Church members met people at the railroad and bus stations to direct families to Olivet's ministries which included a day nursery, home for working girls, and a bus to bring children and the elderly to worship.

Olivet soon outgrew its facilities. In 1918, after the white First Baptist Church moved, Olivet bought the historic building at 31st Street and South Park Avenue. One Sunday in September, the entire congregation marched

from the old church building to the new one singing "Onward Christian Soldiers."

Helping Williams was S. Mattie Fisher, daughter of Olivet's late pastor. Fisher was one of the first African Americans trained as a social worker. She and Mrs. Jessie Mapp helped Olivet "grow from a church to a religious center." They canvassed the neighborhood around the new building and surveyed the needs of over 5,000 area households. Olivet used the information to make over 62,000 home visits to the sick, elderly, shut-ins, and needy.

Those connections helped create a kindergarten and children's church so children could "enjoy religious worship from [their] viewpoint." The women organized a young women's group and a Mother's Circle. Mrs. Mapp taught a weekly Life of Christ class to young married women. She also led a Mother's Circle where the Bible, home economics, sewing and mending, and how to have a healthy home were taught. There women had the opportunity to discuss problems resulting from overcrowded neighborhoods and to support each other.

Olivet continued to grow. Membership reached about 12,000 while the Sunday school had 3,100 pupils each week. The church was said to be both the world's largest African-American and Protestant congregation. Williams led a staff of over 30 workers including two associate pastors and three or four ministerial students from the University of Chicago Divinity School. The church had 860 volunteer officers in charge of 55 departments.

Olivet was well known both nationally and internationally. In 1928, Williams was appointed vice president of the Baptist World Alliance and received the national Harmon Foundation prize for distinguished religious service.

In 1940, Williams and another minister were tragically killed in a plane crash while on the way to a political rally in Flint, Michigan. He will be remembered as one of the most celebrated pastor/preachers to ever stand in the pulpit. Together, Williams and Fisher reached out to thousands of African-American migrants.

Williams is remembered for his ability to move an audience, the shiny glow in his eyes, his analytical mind, and his sharp gift of exposition. Here is an excerpt from one of his sermons, preached on the first Sunday of the New Year, 1926, to encourage the Olivet congregation, taken from the book *Preaching with Sacred Fire* by Martha Simmons:

"Christ prayed for your safety. This should invite and deepen your faith and dependence upon God. It should check your haste, confusion, and restlessness and make you satisfied with His daily provisions and providence. This should lead you to know that you are not a creature of chance or fate but the child of God and the heir of a pleasing heritage. If He permits or sends hardships, He will give upholding, enduring grace. Paul loathed his handicaps and prayed for their removal, but God's answer was, 'My grace is sufficient for thee.' This is the thing that kindles and maintains hope and leads to victory. Surely we have here no uncertain way or doubtful results. For through Him we are conquerors, yea, more than conquerors."



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