



Florence Spearling Randolph

Florence Spearing Randolph

'Christ Is All in All'

by Victoria McAfee

"African Americans should forget our color and only remember that life is a great state of action and we too must play our part. Perseverance only gains success, and since each of us is assigned a work, let us go about it diligently...."

Florence Spearing Randolph stood tall as a suffragist, civic reformer, temperance leader, and pastor. Her constant speaking out and organizing against discrimination, poverty, and inequality helped set the stage for the later Civil Rights movement.

The youngest of seven children, she was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on August 9, 1866, to John and Anna Smith Spearing. Her family was proud of their free heritage—no one had been a slave in the family for two generations before the Civil War.

Her father, a cabinet maker and painter, took on the responsibility of raising the children after Florence's mother died during her childhood. At age 8, Florence accompanied her blind grandmother, a city missionary in Charleston, to pray with the sick and explain the Scriptures to people. This experience deeply touched Florence, and she made a decision for Christ at age 13.

When she visited her older sisters in New York, she discovered dressmaking was in great demand there, so she moved to New Jersey. Her business was so successful she employed seven people.

In 1884 while in New Jersey, she married Hugh Randolph of Richmond, Virginia, a cook on a railroad dining car. Sadly, Hugh Randolph passed away in 1913, making Florence a young widow. The couple had one daughter, Leah Viola.

Florence became a Sunday school teacher and youth leader in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church, began studying the Bible under the tutelage of the Rev. E. George Biddle, and took a correspondence course from the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

In 1892, she noticed a crowd across the street from her dress-making business and heard an intoxicated young man causing a disturbance next to a saloon. She shook her head and thought aloud, "If I had my way I would close every saloon before night." A white woman who heard her invited her to a meeting of the Jersey City Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Florence said that event "marked the beginning of 14 years of real missionary work among those who suffer from strong drink and from poverty. Thus as a [member of the] WCTU, [Young People's Society of] Christian Endeavor, King's Daughter, and [as a] Sunday school teacher, I soon developed into a Bible student, discovering that one can do a real telling work for God and humanity."

Initially, she dismissed the idea of becoming a woman preacher, but in 1898 the pastor of the Jersey City AME Zion Church became ill, and Florence started the church meeting. The enthusiastic reception encouraged her to lead many more evangelistic meetings around the state. Florence joined the New Jersey Conference of the AME Zion and petitioned the denomination for a license to preach. This caused a great conflict concerning women being in positions of authority. But Florence received her license, which led to ordination as a minister and recognition as a denomination

evangelist. However, the ordination only allowed her to serve as a deacon. Finally, in 1903, she was ordained an elder, which allowed her to consecrate the sacraments and serve Communion.

God opened the door for her to minister internationally. In 1901, she served as a delegate to an international ecumenical conference in London. As head of the New Jersey Women's Foreign Missionary Society, she set up a Bureau of Foreign Supply to collect and distribute donations for missionaries. This led her to visit AME Zion missionaries in Liberia and Ghana from 1922 to 1924 at her own expense. She brought a young African girl back to be educated in the U.S.

Politically, Randolph organized the New Jersey State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, where she served as president for 12 years, and she argued before the New Jersey State Legislature for the state to adopt the Nineteenth Amendment so women could vote. The Republican Party appointed her to assist in the women's division organizing the vote for Warren G. Harding, and later helped her run for nomination as state assemblywoman.

She pastored four small, struggling AME Zion churches in New York and New Jersey—for no salary—before the denomination assigned her to a "temporary" pastoral position at Wallace Chapel in Summit, New Jersey, in 1925. The church was really a mission with only 35 members that met in the local YMCA. She led that growing congregation for over 20 years, guiding the building of a new church, parsonage, and community center. She goes down in history as one of the few women in the denomination to receive both a regular ordination and appointment to a church. During that time, she was the first African-American woman to enroll in an advanced course at Madison and Drew Seminary (later known as Drew University). In 1933, she was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Livingstone College, and Drew University now offers a Reverend Florence Spearing Randolph Prize through their theological school.

Pastor Randolph's messages in church and in political gatherings attacked racism and sexism. She believed Christianity and participation in civil rights causes fit together like a hand and glove. In a message to AME Zion Woman's Home and Forage Mission Society, she commented on the horrible lynchings in the South: "How could such things occur in a great county such as America? It's because we know not God... the only thing that needs to be stressed anytime and anywhere among church groups is the need of a clear interpretation of Jesus Christ and His teaching."

One of her sermons, "If I Were White," was widely publicized by the major newspapers of the day. She said in part, "If I were white and believed in God, in His Son Jesus Christ. . . I would speak in no uncertain words against race prejudice, hate, oppression and injustice. . . ."

Though she was controversial and outspoken about racism, suffrage, and discrimination, Florence was also known for her great empathy and generosity. People called her "Mother Bird" because she loved to put her arms around people and love them with the love of Jesus. Rev. Florence Spearing Randolph died in 1951, aged 85 years, and is remembered for her response whenever asked for the secret of her success: "Christ is all in all."



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