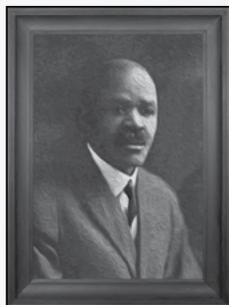


Highlights in Black History



Lacey Kirk Williams and S. Mattie Fisher

Serving the Lord and Man from Olivet Church

by 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 the cause of Christ and His Church. His life took him from his birth in a one-room cabin in Alabama to pastor of the largest African-American church in Chicago. There he met S. Mattie Fisher, the daughter of the late pastor, and the two would have a major impact on the millions of African Americans who migrated north during the early 1900s.

Williams was born July 11, 1871, the son of former slaves Levi Shorter and Elizabeth Hill in a cabin on the Shorter Plantation near Eufaula, Alabama. Eventually Levi changed the family name from Shorter to Williams, and when Lacey was six years old, the family moved from Alabama to the Brazos River bottomlands of Burleson County, Texas. At age 16, he left home to attend school in Waco, Texas, where he was certified to teach. He came back to Burleson County to teach school and married one of his pupils, Georgia Lewis. In a revival service, Williams made a profession of faith, was baptized, and was soon ordained a Baptist minister.

Williams had a persistent desire to gain education so he could adequately teach God's people. He led several congregations in Texas, before enrolling in Bishop College in Marshall in 1902. In 1907, he became pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church in Dallas and in 1909, moved to the prestigious Mount Gilead Baptist Church in Fort Worth. In 1913, he received a B.A. degree from Arkansas Baptist College and in 1914, an honorary D.D. degree from Selma University in Alabama.

At this time, people of color were migrating by the thousands from the South to the North to find jobs. Many settled on the south side of Chicago, where it is estimated the African-American population grew from 44,000 to 109,000 from 1916 to 1919. In 1916, Williams answered God's call to leave Texas to pastor Olivet Baptist Church in south Chicago after the death of its pastor, the Rev. Elijah J. Fisher. In five years, church membership rose to over 4,000, due in part to his eloquent preaching, excellent leadership skills, and the church's outreach ministries.

Williams clashed with his fellow black ministers for not wanting to become more involved in solving the problems of the migration, saying Chicago churches were "suitable only for paying, prayer, and preaching." He said they were "more interested in preaching, worship, ceremonies, [and] the things of the sanctuary than they are in the urgent, vital needs of a struggling humanity."

"Olivet" became a byword for help among those who were migrating north. Church members met people at the railroad and bus stations to direct families to Olivet's ministries, which included a day nursery, a home for working girls, and a church bus to bring children and the elderly to worship. Other area churches grew as well, but Olivet soon outgrew its facilities. In 1918, the white First Baptist Church moved from its facilities, and Olivet bought the historic building at 31st

Street and South Park Avenue, which could seat 3,500 in its sanctuary. One Sunday in September, the entire congregation marched from the old church building to the new one singing “Onward Christian Soldiers.”

Helping Williams reach out to the thousands of migrants was S. Mattie Fisher, the daughter of the late pastor. Fisher was one of the first African Americans trained to be a social worker. She and Mrs. Jessie Mapp helped Olivet, as she said, “grow from a church to a religious center.” They canvassed the neighborhood around the new building in 1918, one on each side of the street, and surveyed the needs of over 5,000 area households. Using information from the survey, over 62,000 home visits were made during the next four years to the sick, elderly, shut-ins, and needy.

Out of those connections came a kindergarten and children’s church so children could “enjoy religious worship from [their] viewpoint.” The women also organized a young women’s group and a Mother’s Circle. Mrs. Mapp taught a Life of Christ class to young married women one night of the week, and in the Mother’s Circle she taught them not only the Bible but home economics, sewing and mending, and how to have a healthy home. The Mother’s Circle gave the women the opportunity to discuss the many problems resulting from overcrowding in the neighborhoods and to offer support to each other.

Church growth continued until membership in the 1930s reached about 12,000—one out of every 15 African Americans who lived in Chicago. 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 had two



associate pastors assisting him as well as three or four ministerial students from the University of Chicago Divinity School, where he was one of the first African Americans to lecture to the students. The church had 30 other workers on staff as well as 860 volunteer officers in charge of its 55

departments.

Olivet became 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. But in 1940, he and another Chicago minister were tragically killed in a plane crash while on the way to a political rally in Flint, Michigan.

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.”