Celebrating the Life and Legacy of Rev. Joseph M. Copeland

Written by Rev. Yvonne Delk (D. Min.)

Our beloved pastor, teacher, leader died peacefully on August 14, 2020. We were blessed to have him with us for 98 years, He was an extraordinary pastor mentor, teacher who gave his life to Christ and allowed God to fully use his gifts that he shared in word and example.

He was nurtured in the faith under the leadership of his father Reverend Joseph H. Copeland and his mother Ethel Creek Copeland. His roots run deep in the Afro Christian tradition attending pastors’ classes at the Franklinton Christian College, Franklinton, North Carolina. He answered the call to the Christian ministry in 1952 at his home church --Zion Bethel -- and was ordained to the Christian ministry in 1954.

In 1955, Rev. Copeland was called to the pastorate of Macedonia Christian Church in Norfolk. In February 1957, he was called to Zion United Church of Christ where he served for 30 years. He resigned from Macedonia Christian Church in 1960 to accept the pastorate of Union Congregational Christian Church in Norfolk, where he served for 26 years. He affirmed the biblical call to break down the dividing walls of hostility -- especially the walls created by sexism and racism. During his pastorate at Macedonia he ordained the first woman who had been licensed by the Convention of the South.

Rev. Copeland served on the UCC’s Commission for Racial Justice during the 1971 trial and conviction of the Civil Right activists known as the Wilmington Ten, which included Rev. Ben Chavis. The sentences were commuted in 1978 and the convictions overturned by the fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in 1980, but it was not until the end of 2012 that the activists received a pardon from the governor of North Carolina. Rev. Copeland remarked after this pardon that “I like many others found cause to rejoice for we felt that at last justice had been done”.

In 1975, he was the first African American elected to the Presidency of the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ. He served as a trustee of UCC Elon University, North Carolina.

We are grateful for the mark that he has left upon the Southern Conference and all who were touched by his faith, his love, his life, his legacy.

Our love and prayers surround his wife of 77 years, Lillian Copeland and the Copeland family.