

The Life & Legacy of Charles T. Ford

When Charlie met Mary he expressed his love for her. On January 6, 1940 Charlie married Mary. The Fords waited patiently for God to gift them with a baby. They prayed and they prayed, watched and waited, but no baby. The people kept asking over and over, "Mary don't you and Charlie want a child?" Their answer was always just a smile. Charlie was an auto mechanic and farm vehicle mechanic hard at work with his mind on his impending family. Mary had finished 11 grades in Smithfield, but blacks were denied a full 12 years in Smithfield. Fully determined as she was, she traveled to Norfolk to finish her education at Booker T. Washington High School.

Mary worked for the local bankers rearing their children and keeping the money overnight. After waiting 7 years, the gift of a bouncing baby boy, Charles Thomas was born, and they knew they would give him back to the Lord. He grew up at Hill Street Baptist Church, under Dr. S.R. Williams where he learned everything about service. He attended the church's Mother Goose kindergarten and later entered public school. Even though his family in Riverview, he had to walk to school past the Smithfield High School complex to arrive at Isle of Wight training school at the current location of Westside Elementary. He began to play the piano at home, an old upright, by ear. Piano lessons were given by Mrs. Eunice Wilkins of Portsmouth, VA who would come to the church parsonage on Main Street on Saturdays. However, he was already well prepared. The Hill Street choir directors, Mr. Ashland Wilkerson and Mrs. Ida Wright Herring, were excellent musicians and had taught sight-reading and pitch as they prepared choir members for full recital, including the entire Hallelujah Chorus. By his high school years, Charles was singing solos in the church choir and attending the Hampton Ministers Choir and Organist Guild summer concert along with his church soloist partner, Gerald Dixon. The choir master at Westside High School was Mrs. Marie C. Day. Charles was one of the major soloists and her accompanist for the choir Mrs. Day at each spring recital. The Omega staff men, Mr. Harrell and Mr. Hendrick, sponsored an Omega Talent Show each year on which Charles would sing and play.

The class of 1965 at Westside elected Charles their class president. While in school, he developed another of his talents as a member of Mrs. Hazel Clemons' typing class. Not only did he learn the art of making programs, but he received a Cortez Peters card for typing 98wpm with less than 3 errors. He was also chosen, in those years of segregation, to attend *Boy's State*. After baccalaureate and commencement, in June of 1965, Charles became a Spartan at Norfolk State College. He began the fall semester with a concentration in vocal and ~~secular~~ ^{sacred} music. Immediately, his talents were recognized and he was playing not only piano, but the organ as well. At Norfolk he was an active support of the band, notable traveling to the hill (VSU) to attend his rival's games with his buddies, Sherman Addison, George Bradby, William Hill, Robert Walker, and Gerald Dixon. Again, he was the accompanist for several for the singing groups on NSC's campus and formed one of his own, named the Washington and Ford Foundation. This gospel group did all of the local churches, singing to the glory of God freely. His official singing career there included vocal recital, *The Collegium Musicum*, the traveling concert choir, and the recording concert choir making the album *Ye Shall Make Have a Song* in 1970 on which Charles was a soloist. He also performed in professional operas, such as *Barber of Seville*. It funny how Charles always played, but always refused to teach students because he said he just couldn't. Charles' organ teacher, Dr. Larry G. Palmer, was the organ master also at Trinity Lutheran Church on Granby Street in Norfolk. He would take Charles on Sunday to spot pages for him and learn the order of service there. When Dr. Palmer left, Charles became the organ mater at Trinity Lutheran. He was responsible for not only playing the

entire service, but directing the choir, singing solos, choosing hymns, and doing all of the dedications. Also in years after college he was the organist for Bank Street Memorial Baptist Church, a singer member and accompaniment of PCP and the Shirley Robertson singers, among several other singers. He spent quite a bit of time, at the bishop's request, playing for most of the conferences of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His classmates would call him all over the United States to play at weddings, ceremonies, funerals, and other special occasions.

He would attend the Hampton University Choir Directors' and Organists' Guild, and sing with the massive choir each year. He also auditioned for and won solo parts in that group. He became an officer, and using their advancement scale, moved up each term until he became the Guild's President. Held that office from 2007 through 2011. He was noted for making his deep baritone speeches at the conference each year.

In 1976, the Main Street Pastor Dr. S.R Williams wrote a letter to Charles while he was still serving at Trinity Lutheran in Norfolk, and told him it was time for him to come home. Charles consented and moved back to Smithfield where he remained serving faithfully as organist, choir director, executive secretary, day care worker/supervisor, cook and caterer, security, delivery receiver, postal worker, and any other task the church required 24/7. Even after an amputation, he took minimum time to heal before returning to service. Even if there was program of any style, and for any group, he would always be present to prepare for the program for that occasion and playing the organ/piano for the event. Many of those events and programs were for the community rather than church events. Always on call to anybody who requested services. Local churches relied on him to help out when they needed an organist or pianist. He would be a supply musician for soloist and groups. Many people found that Charles could always find their key or get them the key they needed. He played for banquets and many special occasions. Notably, he could take a small one to two inch square of paper and create an entire program.

The nephews often recalled how they would be at their grandmother's and "Uncle Bubba" scared them as they were playing nerf ball as he would call out to them to "sit down". They would run and hide under a table while he was at home to change his clothes for a new occasion to play for. After quickly dressing he would leave the house and the three nephews would emerge again to play until their parents arrived. The grand-nieces and grand-nephew named him "Uncle Bubble" when they would see him at church and giggle at the name. He had a series of "wives" who would pay special attention to Mr. Bubba, including Denise Wynn, Beverly Wiggins, Shirley Robertson, Erma Wilson, Thais Black, Karen Greene, Josephine Ridley "AKA Ms. Boo" and Rhonda AKA "Rinda" Bradby. Charles was noted for his sitting in Lacy Park greeting those who walked along the sidewalk, and bringing in new members to the church. He was friendly and especially helpful to ministers of all persuasions. His was a lovely voice serving God and his people at any call. No request was too small or too large for Mr. Bubba. As you think of him remember that he loved human kind, whether many thought they were worthy of love or not. What a real example Charles was for being God's servant, giving his whole life to lift up fallen humanity everywhere. His memory will be preserved by his sisters Edna Ford Powell and Martha L. Evans Jackson, nephews and nieces Julian Evans, William and Tracey Powell, Charles and Tanesha Powell, Danielle D'Amico Lawrence, and Mary Margret D'Amico Gentile; grand-nephew and grand-nieces, Cameron Powell, Amaya Powell, and Kailyn McMillan, close friends Denise Wynn, Beverly Wiggins, Shirley Robertson, Erma Wilson, Johnnie Porter, Sandra Smith, Carlin Taylor, Melvin Raines, Lillie M. Bell; and many of cousins, friends, and church family.