

CRC's First Black Pastor Returns 42 Years After Bitter Farewell



From left, Rev. Denise Posie of Immanuel CRC in Kalamazoo, Mich., beside her guest speaker and admired mentor, Rev. Eugene Callender.

The first African American evangelist and minister ordained in the Christian Reformed Church made history again as he returned to a CRC pulpit after a decades-long absence.

Rev. Eugene Callender preached April 22 at Immanuel Christian Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Mich., at the invitation of Immanuel's pastor, Rev. Denise Posie, a long-time admirer.

Callender, the pastor of a Harlem, N.Y., church known today as the Christian Parish for Spiritual Renewal, was a pioneering evangelist to the African American community who helped extend the reach of Christian Reformed Home Missions and the Back to God Hour's Christian radio ministry into the black community in the early '50s.

Second CRC of Paterson, N.J., called Callender as an evangelist in 1951, and the classes of Hudson and Hackensack subsequently licensed him to preach. Callender served Second CRC as associate minister and later established the Mid-Harlem Community Parish in Harlem.

Callender's ministry has focused on uplifting the broken, the poor, and the disenfranchised. Always seeking to balance his preaching with social-justice activism and community development, he spent a lot of time

working on meeting his parish's practical needs for fair and affordable housing, drug rehabilitation programs, racial and economic justice, crime prevention, and better education.

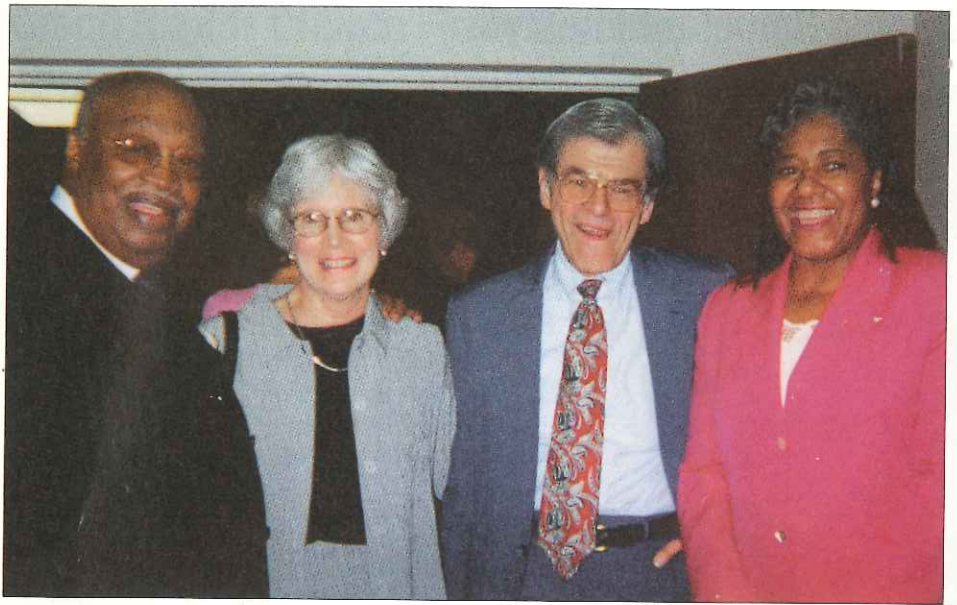
"Rev. Callender is an inspiration to me," said Posie, who traveled with a group to visit Callender's church in Harlem last year. Posie is herself a trailblazer as one of the first African American women to pastor a Christian Reformed church, and her ministry also focuses on racial and social outreach. Posie hopes to see revival and a broadening of vision in her church and community as a result of Callender's visit. "I was excited that he agreed to come," she said. "It meant a lot to me to have him here."

Rev. Peter Borgdorff, executive director of ministries for the CRC, noted that Callender helped to begin the kind of urban ministry in the CRC that Posie is now doing in Kalamazoo.

But Callender's own association with the CRC ended abruptly in 1959, when church authorities asked him to step down from his post. Having earlier expressed concerns about the "episcopally oriented liturgy . . . and vestment of the minister" and having warned Callender to spend more of his time on the spiritual aspects of his task and less on "projects of a civic nature," some voices in the denominational leadership had become critical of Callender's ministry. And when the Board of Home Missions learned that Callender's marriage was ending, the executive committee recommended that Callender take a leave of absence and effect reconciliation or be removed from his post.

Callender resigned and accepted a call to serve a Presbyterian church a few blocks away. Thus the ministry of the denomination's first African American missionary/preacher ended on a bitter note.

Another minister took over leadership of the Mid-Harlem Community Parish, which soon afterward became the Manhattan Christian Reformed Church. And though Callender had taken some flack for the social and civic focus of his work, his ideas and methods continued to have influence, and social issues continued to occupy a major portion of the church's ministry under the new leadership for several years. Sadly, the



church lost its last Christian Reformed pastor in the 1980s and fell into serious decline, unable to attract a new minister to their pulpit.

Meanwhile Callender went on to serve his community through the Presbyterian Church, the educational system, and through local, state, and federal agencies. He organized the Harlem Freedom School, the Street Academy Program, and an addicts rehabilitation center; created a television program; served the New York state office of the Aging, and the state Parole Board; worked as executive director of the Urban League; and served on the commissions of five U.S. presidents.

One of the reasons Posie wanted so much to meet Callender was to ask him, looking back, how he feels about his career and the outcome of his association with the CRC. "I wanted to ask him [this] question," Posie said: "Was it worth it?"

But Callender bears no grudges, only gratitude. "I am deeply grateful to the CRC for giving birth to my ministry," he said. Whatever bitterness he might have felt at the time, Callender realizes now that his departure from the CRC was a springboard that allowed him to take his ministry in new directions and to give his social-justice ministry a much larger scope. Rather than an obstacle, the rift with the CRC turned out to be an opportunity.

From left, Callender, Adele and Rev. Duane Vander Brug of Christian Reformed Home Missions, and Posie share a laugh in the fellowship hall after the worship service.

Preaching at the Sunday-morning worship service at Immanuel, Callender challenged Christian Reformed Church members and guests to embrace and include people of all races, and to work for justice.

His message, like his ministry, has always been informed, Callender said, by a "deep conviction that the dignity of human beings is sacred. . . . People should not be judged by external conditions which are arbitrarily assigned in life, but rather by the possibilities inherent in being a child of God."

Rev. Duane Vander Brug, a regional director for Christian Reformed Home Missions and a former colleague who worked with Callender years ago, came to hear him speak at Immanuel and stayed to visit with him afterward. Vander Brug called Callender's return to the CRC pulpit "significant" and commented, "He was way ahead of his time in seeing what should happen in urban ministry."

—Jennifer Parker