

Florence Spearing Randolph

Holiness preacher and social reformer

Florence Spearing Randolph was among a small group of women evangelists who were licensed to preach and ordained as deacons and elders in the late 19th century. She was a member of the AME Zion Church and one of the first women in the denomination to receive a regular ordination and an appointment to a church.

A renowned minister, missionary, suffragist, lecturer, organizer and temperance worker, Florence was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on August 9, 1866, to John and Anna Smith Spearing. When she was very young, her mother died, leaving her father, a cabinetmaker and painter, with four children to rear.

Florence, the youngest child, attended local public schools and became a dressmaker following graduation. In 1882, at the age of 16, she moved to New York City and later to Jersey City, New Jersey, where she met and married Hugh Randolph of Richmond, Virginia, who worked on the railroad as a cook.

Florence had been converted at the age of 13 and frequently accompanied her blind grandmother on house visits to pray with the sick and to explain the Scriptures. This experience left a deep impression on the young girl, who later determined to pursue a career in ministry.

Florence began studying the Bible under the tutelage of the Rev. E. George Biddle, an AME Zion minister and Yale graduate. Throughout the late 1880s and early 1890s, she was an active temperance and church worker but professed distaste at the idea of being a woman preacher.

Later, in 1898, convinced that God had called her to preach,

Florence joined the New Jersey Conference of the AME Zion Church. After a lengthy, bitter debate over the issue of elevating women to positions of authority in the church, she was ordained a deacon in 1901 and an elder in 1903.

Florence was well-known as a lecturer at the New Jersey Women's Christian Temperance Union and was founding president of the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. She was also an executive board member of the New Jersey State Suffrage Association.

Her lectures and speeches frequently attacked racism, colonialism and sexism. She was a foremost advocate and practitioner of the holiness doctrine. She referred to holiness in many of her sermons.

Florence served as pastor of Wallace Chapel AME Zion Church in Summit, New Jersey, from 1925 until her retirement in 1946. She continued as pastor emeritus until her death in 1951.

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