

Urban Ministries Inc. Founder Dr. Melvin E. Banks Sr. Dies at 86

Urban Ministries Inc. announced today that its founder Dr. Melvin E. Banks Sr. died on Saturday, Feb. 13, at 86. Banks launched UMI in 1970 to provide African American churches and individuals with images reflecting their congregations and relatable, Christ-centered content from an urban perspective.

“Dr. Banks was a revolutionary publisher and giant for the African American church and community,” said C. Jeffrey Wright, CEO of UMI. “He was the first to create contextualized content that portrayed positive images of African Americans in the Bible. Because of his innovation, UMI has reached millions of Black churches and individuals with the gospel.”

For the last 50 years, under Banks’ leadership, UMI has developed Christian education resources, including Bible studies, Sunday school and Vacation Bible School curriculum, websites, magazines, books and videos for its 40,000-plus strong customer base. He wrote a number of books and devotionals and hosted a two-minute daily podcast called *Daily Direction*. In 1995, he brought on Mr. Wright as CEO to take on the day-to-day management of the company. Many evangelical organizations have recognized his pioneering work, including the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, which presented him with its inaugural Kenneth N. Taylor Lifetime Achievement Award in 2017.

“So many people have been introduced to the life-changing message of Jesus because of Dr. Banks’ groundbreaking initiatives,” said Terri Hannett, Vice President of UMI. “For 50 years, UMI has produced discipleship content that was intellectually rigorous and uniquely relevant for the Black

experience.”

Banks was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1934 and made a commitment to salvation at the age of 9. He graduated from Moody Bible College in Chicago in 1955 and attended Wheaton College, earning a B.A. degree in theology in 1958 and his master’s degree in biblical studies in 1960. After graduation, he took a job at Scripture Press Publishers, where he struggled to sell euro-centric Sunday school content to African American churches. This experience led him to create contextual resources for African Americans with imagery and stories unique to their culture. After a few years, he left the company to start his own to expand the publishing content for Black churches.

Banks had served as board chair since 1994 after the passing of Tom Skinner, the founding board chair of UMI. On Feb. 14, 2021, the UMI Board of Directors voted to appoint Dr. Stanley Long to the role of chairman after he had served as vice chairman for the past 45 years.

“Dr. Banks has been one of my closest friends for nearly 50 years,” said Long. “I will miss him beyond what words can describe. He and I have shared the same vision and burden for as many years as we have been friends. As board chair, I will invest as much energy as he did to continue the work of UMI in the same direction it has journeyed from its inception, to impact the lives of as many men, women, and children as possible.”

Banks also planted the Westlawn Gospel Chapel church in Chicago and co-founded the Urban Outreach Foundation to reach pastors, lay leaders and Christian educators through conferences and other resources. He also co-founded Circle Y Ranch, a Christian camp and conference center for urban youth. Banks received an honorary doctorate of literature from Wheaton College in 1992 and served as a board trustee.

Banks died from a month-long illness and is survived by his wife, Olive, and his three children, Melvin Jr., Patrice Lee and Reginald. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be sent to Circle Y Ranch Bible Camp c/o UMI 1551 Regency Ct. Calumet City, IL 60409 or via the website referencing Dr. Banks. Resolutions and tributes can be sent to bankstributes@. {eo}

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