

African American Leaders in the PC(USA)

Irvin Windfield Underhill, Jr.



Irvin Windfield Underhill, Jr. was born in Ohio on April 8, 1896, and grew up in Philadelphia. Though he had dropped out of school and become the head of the household at fourteen, Irvin was able to prepare for college even while working, and graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1922 with a degree in finance. After a short three-year career as a bank cashier in Philadelphia, he enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary. Irvin graduated in 1928—he married Susan Theresa Reynolds and was ordained by the Presbytery of Philadelphia that same year. The newly wed couple were the first Black missionaries appointed to the West African Mission, where they served from 1929 until 1940. One of their biggest contributions to the mission was the founding of the first school in the African Pygmy community. This work led to Irvin's being made a Life Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of England in 1937. Sadly, Susan was not present to celebrate her husband's achievement, as she had passed in 1934. Irvin returned to his hometown of Philadelphia in November 1940.

From 1941 to 1951, Irvin served as the manager of the Philadelphia Housing Authority's Richard Allen Homes, the city's largest low-rent public housing project. He acted as a migratory labor and housing consultant for the PA Department of Labor and Industry for five years, beginning in 1952. From 1946 to 1954, Irvin served as a member of the Redevelopment Authority and was elected both treasurer and chair of the Rehousing Advisory Committee. He served on the Mayor's Goodwill Committee, the Interracial Committee of the Federated Churches of Philadelphia, and other similar groups. Irvin sat on the board of directors of several organizations, including the United Fund, the Mercy-Douglass Hospital, the Health and Welfare Council of Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Prison Society. Though he did not return to the West African Mission, retiring from missionary service in 1947, Irvin remained involved, acting as a Consultant on Africa for the U.S. State Department during WWII.

Irvin and Virginia Agnes Dickerson, whom he married in May 1943, left Philadelphia in 1957 when Irvin accepted a call from the First Presbyterian Church in Nunda, NY. This was a historic moment, as this was the first all-white Presbyterian congregation in the nation to call a Black pastor to its pulpit. During the decade that he preached there—the longest pastorate in the church's history—membership doubled in size. Irvin retired from Nunda's pulpit in February 1967.

Mrs. Virginia Underhill was killed in a car accident in February 1968, which occurred on the way to the First Presbyterian Church of Lima, NY, where Irvin was interim pastor. His third marriage was to Ruth Estella Coffin, a college professor, whom he wed in August 1969. He continued to serve as an interim pastor to various congregations, before being elected by the Presbytery of Genesee Valley as a commissioner to the January 1974 meeting of the Synod of the Northeast. Irvin preached his last sermon on July 26, 1981. In March 1982, at the 15th Annual Conference of Black Presbyterians United, he was gifted a certificate of appreciation for his many years of service to the Church and its Black constituents. Three months later, Irvin Underhill passed, leaving behind a colorful legacy of advocacy, activism, and passion for the Presbyterian Church and his fellow siblings in Christ.



Read more about Irvin Underhill Jr. on the PHS blog
history.pcusa.org/about/blog/african-american-leaders-series



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