African American Leaders in the PC(USA)

Calvin Houston

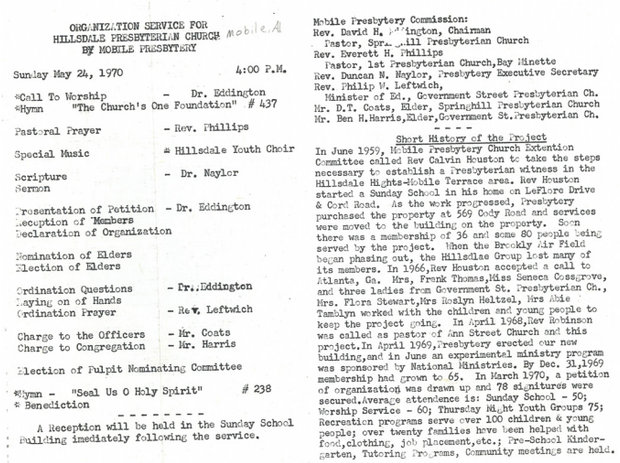
Born in August 1932 in Davidson, North Carolina, Calvin was one of ten children of Logan Houston and Alice Torrence. The Presbyterian church defined his early life. He attended Stillman College (Tuscaloosa, Ala.) and finished a Bachelor of Divinity at Union Presbyterian Seminary (Richmond, Va.). In 1959, the PCUS Presbytery of Central Alabama commissioned Houston as an evangelist, giving him the task of standing up a Black church in Mobile, Alabama's Hillsdale neighborhood. Starting from a living-room Sunday School, Hillsdale Presbyterian Church would join the presbytery in 1970.

Mobile in the 1950s and 1960s, its economy boosted by its Navy shipyard and its Air Force base, did not make the kind of headlines that Montgomery and Selma did. A moderate consensus, largely surrounding the political career of city commissioner Joseph Langan, held sway – Langan easily beat Ku Klux Klan leader E. C. Barnard for a commissioner's seat in 1957 – and the city desegregated more swiftly than other Southern cities in the wake of Brown v Board. The municipal golf course and public library were desegregated in 1961; segregated seating on city buses ended and Murphy High School was desegregated in 1963.

Despite these steps forward, White Citizen's Councils and the Klan were still active, and at one point Houston was compelled to seek a court injunction against the Mobile Klan on behalf of his church. Driving back from court proceedings in Montgomery, according to Frank T. Wilson's account in Black Presbyterians in Ministry, Houston found the teenage daughter of the Mobile Grand Wizard, her car broken down by the side of the road. Still hoping to make Mobile by nightfall, conscious of his exposure on the deserted highway, Houston stopped and helped the teenager, who would later become "an avid, committed worker in Houston's local civil rights organization."

Houston served Rice Memorial Presbyterian Church in Atlanta from 1966 to 1983, and from the 1970s on led the Urban Training Organization of Atlanta (UTOA), an interreligious social justice network. In the words of James Costen, Houston and UTOA became de facto field educators for the students of the Interdenominational Theological Seminary, which had none. "Even in a Black institution there was concern for going off into radical ministries, street ministries and the like," Costen recounted in 1995, and Houston filled that niche.

Calvin Houston retired from Atlanta Presbytery in 1984, and died in 1989.



ORGANIZATION SERVICE FOR HILLSDALE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH Mobile,Al
BY MOBILE PRESBYTERY

Sunday May 24, 1970 4:00 P.M.

*Call To Worship – Dr. Eddington
*Hymn "The Church's One Foundation" # 437

Pastoral Prayer – Rev. Phillips

Special Music – Hillsdale Youth Choir

Scripture – Dr. Naylor
Sermon

Presentation of Petition – Dr. Eddington
Reception of Members
Declaration of Organization

Nomination of Elders
Election of Elders

Ordination Questions – Dr. Eddington
Laying on of Hands – Rev. Leftwich
Ordination Prayer

Charge to the Officers – Mr. Coats
Charge to Congregation – Mr. Harris

Election of Pulpit Nominating Committee

*Hymn – "Seal Us O Holy Spirit" # 238
* Benediction

A Reception will be held in the Sunday School Building imediately following the service.

Mobile Presbytery Commission:
Rev. David H. [illegible]ington, Chairman
Pastor, Spr[illegible]ill Presbyterian Church
Rev. Everett H. Phillips
Pastor, 1st Presbyterian Church, Bay Minette
Rev. Duncan N. Naylor, Presbytery Executive Secretary
Rev. Philip W. Leftwich,
Minister of Ed., Government Street Presbyterian Ch.
Mr. D.T. Coats, Elder, Springhill Presbyterian Church
Mr. Ben H. Harris, Elder, Government St. Presbyterian Ch.

Short History of the Project

In June 1959, Mobile Presbytery Church Extention Committee called Rev Calvin Houston to take the steps necessary to establish a Presbyterian witness in the Hillsdale Hights-Mobile Terrace area. Rev Houston started a Sunday School in his home on LeFlore Drive & Cord Road. As the work progressed, Presbytery purchased the property at 569 Cody Road and services were moved to the building on the property. Soon there was a membership of 36 and some 80 people being served by the project. When the Brookly Air Field began phasing out, the Hillsdlae Group lost many of its members. In 1966,Rev Houston accepted a call to Atlanta, Ga. Mrs, Frank Thomas,Miss Seneca Cossgrove, and three ladies from Government St. Presbyterian Ch., Mrs. Flora Stewart,Mrs Roslyn Haltsel, Mrs Alke Tamblyn worked with the children and young people to keep the project going. In April 1968,Rev Robinson was called as pastor of Ann Street Church and this project.In April 1969,Presbytery erected our new building,and in June an experimentel ministry program was sponsored by National Ministries. By Dec. 31,1969 membership had grown to 65. In March 1970, a petition of organization was drawn up and 78 signitures were secured.Average attendence is: Sunday School - 50; Worship Service - 60; Thursday Night Youth Groups 75; Recreation programs serve over 100 children & young people; over twenty families have been helped with food,clothing, job placement,etc.; Pre-School Kindergarten, Tutoring Programs, Community meetings are held.

Organization service for Hillsdale Presbyterian Church, Mobile, AL, 1970.

PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
The National Archives of the PC(USA)

Read more about Calvin Houston on the PHS blog
history.pcusa.org/about/blog/african-american-leaders-series

AALC

Learn about the AALC Initiative
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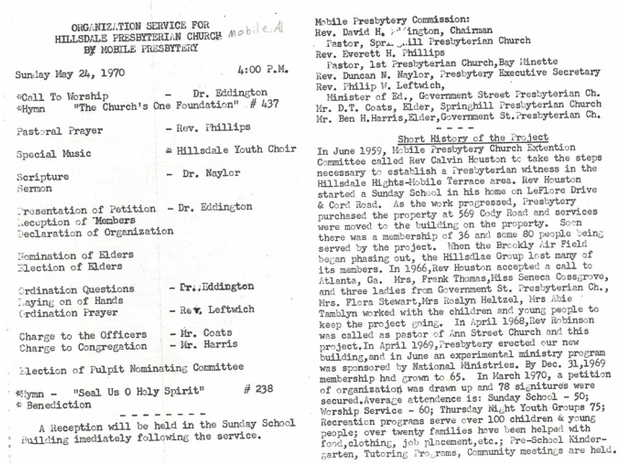

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