

African American Leaders in the PC(USA)

Emily Vera Gibbes



Dr. Emily Vera Gibbes was a Presbyterian educator, administrator, missionary, and leader among women. She was born in 1915 in Harlem, New York, where she and her three sisters grew up in a four-story brownstone in the predominantly Black upper-middle-class neighborhood of “Strivers Row”. As a child, Emily was no stranger to education, politics, or the church. Her father, a devout Christian, was a physician who graduated from Howard College—now known as Howard University—who heartily encouraged his daughters to attend Sunday school. Her mother was a former teacher and suffragist who began taking Emily to meetings when she was only two years old. She often played “school” with her sisters, but she always made sure that she was the teacher. Emily attributed her dedication to the Presbyterian Church, women’s liberation, and education to these childhood experiences.

She attended Sunday school at St. James Presbyterian Church, where her pastor, William Lloyd Imes pushed her into education. Emily taught her first Sunday school class at the age of sixteen. She was also a counselor at a summer camp run by the New York Missions Society, where she continued to work throughout college and well into her professional life. Emily majored in biology at Hunter College and anticipated becoming a teacher. However, by the end of her senior year, much to the dismay of her mother, she decided she no longer wanted to teach. These plans were cemented by the fact that the City of New York was not

making any new teacher assignments by the time she had graduated in 1936. Instead, Emily decided to register for a secretarial course at Gibbs Business School.

Upon completion of the secretarial course, Emily became the private secretary for Genevieve Earle, the first woman elected to the New York City Council. During her seven years in the position, she managed two of Earle’s campaigns and worked towards a master’s degree in religious education from New York University. She left her job in 1947 to join the Board of Christian Education, where she was quickly promoted to Director of Religious Education. There, Emily supervised religious education programs from Maine to Cuba, ran leadership workshops, and worked with local youth.

Six years later, she was asked to be the Regional Secretary for the PCUSA Board of Christian Education of Women’s Work. While she was hesitant at first, she soon relocated to Philadelphia and accepted the position. As Regional Secretary, Emily worked primarily with women in the church, developing leadership seminars and study programs. When her supervisor retired, she quickly filled the empty role, becoming Secretary for the Women’s Department and holding offices all over the country. Emily honed her skills to promote female Christian leadership at the international level and was the leader of the Women’s International Fellowship where she toured India, Pakistan, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Japan. In 1966, Emily left her position with the Woman’s Program to become a missionary. After a month-long training and a trip to Paris in order to learn French, she was stationed in Cameroon. She spent a few years there developing leadership schools before doing the same in Kenya, where she found her work much easier, as English was spoken there instead of French.

After being offered a position to work off the coast of Australia, Emily found herself homesick and returned to Philadelphia. Back in Philadelphia, she took a position with the National Council of Churches where she worked on the committee for the Revised Standard Version Bible. She focused on the masculine language of the modern bibles and led changes to revise it back to its original neutral state. She went on to become a board member for the New York Theological Seminary, where she taught for five years. After a distinguished career, Emily finally retired and settled down in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Dr. Gibbes passed away on March 22, 2004.



Read more about Emily Vera Gibbes on the PHS blog
history.pcusa.org/about/blog/african-american-leaders-series



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