

African American Leaders in the PC(USA)

St. Paul Langley Epps



On February 18, 1916, St. Paul Langley Epps was born to Azarina Langley and William Henry Epps in Norfolk, Virginia. He was the sixth child of eight, the seventh being his twin brother Richard. Epps's interest in ministry began at a young age. While many children played "school" and pretended to be teachers, Epps opted instead to play "church," taking on the role of a pastor. Epps graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1935 and enrolled at Virginia Union University for junior college. Rev. Evans helped him transfer to and get a scholarship at Knoxville College in Tennessee, where he graduated with a degree in Sociology in 1939. Epps went on to graduate from Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary in 1942 with a Bachelor of Theology.

After receiving his degree, Epps became a pastor at First United Presbyterian Church in Henderson, North Carolina. He served there until 1946, when he received a call from the Mission Board of the UPCUSA, asking if he wanted to do missionary work. It was unlikely and difficult for Black missionaries to work overseas, so Epps was offered a position in Los Angeles, California. There, he helped to establish Bel-Vue Community United Presbyterian Church. Usually, a missionary would learn about the church beforehand, but Epps was to start the church completely from scratch. Not only that, but the church purchased an empty lot with a three-car garage on it. It was in this garage that Epps led congregants until construction began in 1948. In an effort to connect with the community and gain congregants, Epps started the Bel-Vue Improvement League, which focused on the needs of Black families in the area. Within a year, people began coming to Bel-Vue for training sessions and Bible classes. At the time, Bel-Vue was the only Black United Presbyterian Church west of the Mississippi River. When Epps left the church in 1964, its congregation had grown to 800 active members.

Epps's name came up in 1968 when Eugene Carson Blake, then the Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., was arrested in Baltimore for his participation in civil rights marches. Blake's critics pointed out that the church wasn't leading by example—there were no Black staff members on the General Council of the General Assembly. Hearing of this, Epps approached church leadership and proposed that he ought to be their new hire. He said that the decision—to leave his congregation and serve at the national level of the Presbyterian Church—was to support both his integrity and the integrity of the church as a whole.



Rev. Epps, his wife Katherine, and 2-year-old daughter Frances Paula. Image from Bel-Vue Community Presbyterian Church's 76th anniversary video.

That is how Epps became the Secretary of Stewardship and Development for the United Presbyterian Church, and later the Executive Director for the Fund for Self Development of People. He retired in 1980 and continued to serve as an interim pastor around North Carolina. He was also an active member of New Hope Presbytery. He passed away on September 16, 2014.



Read more about St. Paul Langley Epps on the PHS blog
history.pcusa.org/about/blog/african-american-leaders-series



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