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— Don Devey

Pastor Strother, a man of vision, is gone

By ABBY LUBY

The Rev. Dr. Rufus A. Strother Jr., a man who inspired many by his limitless compassion and wisdom, died on Thursday, Jan. 20. He was 74. In his 38 years as pastor of the Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills, Pastor Strother was a strong social force who eased and changed race relations in many Westchester communities. He captured the minds of black youth, empowering them to understand and overcome racial barriers.

“Pastor Strother’s death is a huge loss,” said Bedford’s supervisor Lee Roberts. “He was such an integral part of this community and everyone loved him. He was just so caring and giving. He really did a lot to foster relationships with other churches.”

Ms. Roberts said Pastor Strother was one of the original founders of the Northeast Westchester Council on Equality (NWCOE), a group that formed in the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

NWCOE sought to bring churches and individuals together to deal with education, employment, and housing. “He was the driving force behind that — he was a pretty amazing guy,” said Ms. Roberts. Working with Pastor Strother at NWCOE was Katonah resident Don Devey, a parishioner at St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Katonah.

“He was the soul of the organization,” said Mr. Devey. “I was the president of NWCOE, and we worked closely together. We had some amazing battles years ago with New York State Urban Development Corporation to develop low-income housing. It was dramatic times. Pastor Strother was a saint, and I loved him.”

Pastor Strother began his tenure at the height of the civil rights movement in America, a movement that became integral in shaping the spiritual path of the pastor’s leadership. His first parish in 1960 was at the Mount Zion Baptist Church in Stormville, where he was a student pastor. In 1965 he was invited to lead to the Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills. Three years later Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

In a 2004 interview with The Record-Review, Pastor Strother said that after the assassination of Dr. King the morale for blacks fell dramatically. “We felt the world was not a friendly place,” he said. “The council had an ‘attitude committee’ to deal with race and religion problems, a housing committee, and an employment committee that dealt with discrimination. The council was a great piece of machinery for that time.”

Pastor Strother said the council lessened the polarization between people. “We could sit down and talk about our problems rather than throwing stones,” he said.

Every year since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Antioch Baptist Church has honored Dr. King’s birthday with a full-day program of educational seminars, a memorial banquet, and an interfaith worship service.

This year the church produced a video featuring testimony from church elders remembering a time when blacks were harshly treated. Pastor Strother, looking frail, appeared many times in the video, crying when remembering how his father was called “boy.”

The new pastor, the Rev. Dr. Paul S. Briggs, said the video was made while Pastor Strother was quite ill. “He was really suffering for the past year with various illnesses, but now he is not

suffering.” Dr. Briggs said his father and Pastor Strother were friends. “I will miss him terribly — he was a man I grew up with, my father’s friend, my mentor. His death creates a major void.” Church and community also remember Pastor Strother’s magnetic personality and ability to keep people laughing.

“People loved him not only because of his personality but he had such a great sense of humor,” said Ms. Roberts. “People always used to put an “S” on the end of his name, and he would always say, ‘You know, there is only one of me.’ But I would always tease him and say, ‘Gee, we wish there was more than one of you.’”

The Rev. Charles Barton from the First Presbyterian Church in Yorktown, which shared Dr. King’s birthday celebrations, said, “I’m still struck by something he said when he was the keynote speaker at the Martin Luther King banquet. We were all having dinner, and he said to me, ‘While we have all come from different backgrounds and different places to be at this dinner, we are all eating our chicken the same way.’ That was Rufus — he truly lived the gospel.”

Sharing faith with a widening circle of area churches and synagogues was a driving passion of Pastor Strother’s. Rabbi Joshua Davidson of Temple Beth El in Chappaqua said he met Pastor Strother about a year and a half ago. “Last spring we gathered with members of his church for a joint-heritage seder commemorating and sharing the stories of liberation from slavery and how to responsibly work for all those that are oppressed,” said Rabbi Davidson.

Rabbi Davidson said they started a study group of church and temple members to dialogue about worldwide healing. “His was truly a ministry that lived out those lessons, and although he is going to be missed, everything that he taught us we’ll carry with us and will live on,” he said. “It’s not enough to just pray the words and practice the ideals. We need to be reaching out and working together. Pastor Strother’s interfaith work was a great expression of our religious commitment.”

Pastor Strother had his fingers in a lot of community-based pies. He was a consultant to Reader’s Digest Association on community relations in the early 1960’s, a member of the advisory board of the Northeast Westchester Council on Equality (NWCOE); the board of directors of Christian Herald Children’s Home, Bowery Mission, and Young Men’s Home; board of directors of Family Service of Westchester Inc.; board of directors of Mount Kisco Day Care Center, and a member of the board of directors of the Visiting Nurse Association of Hudson Valley.

With a vision for growth, Pastor Strother and the Antioch trustees negotiated the purchase of the present church, and on Palm Sunday, April 11, 1976, the congregation was led by Pastor Strother to their new location on Church and Main streets for the 11 a.m. worship service. In June 2000, the town honored Pastor Strother on his 35th Pastoral Anniversary by naming the street adjacent to Antioch Baptist Church Strother Crossing.

Pastor Strother was also a longtime member of the Central Hudson Baptist Association and served as its moderator from 1979-1982. He has served as administrative assistant to the Rev. Robert W. Dixon, president of the Empire Missionary Baptist Convention. He was also chairman of the convention’s commission on Baptist polity and ethics.

In his last sermon in January, titled “The God of My Years,” the pastor said, “God has sent me some beautiful people, and it’s been a wonderful pilgrimage I’ve made here. I’m thankful to the God of my years. God has been in my past and was with me when I came here to Antioch. I didn’t know everything then, and I still don’t know everything, but I can’t take myself too seriously. We serve a God who watches our back, and he cleans up some of our mess. Wherever I go, I know that God is there.”

Homegoing Service will be held at Antioch Baptist Church, Church and Main streets in Bedford Hills on Monday, Jan. 31, with visitation at 9 a.m. and service at 11 a.m. Interment will be at Oakwood Cemetery in Mount Kisco. Arrangements are entrusted to Jeremiah and Linda Edwards of the Jeremiah Edwards Funeral Home, 645 B Washington St., Peekskill.