



Department of Civil Rights

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Equal Opportunities Division
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Reverend James C. Wright (1926–1995)

Reverend (Rev.) James C. Wright was a native of Camden, South Carolina, and a graduate of Mather Academy, where his teachers served as role models who “dared to make a difference.” They actively fought against segregation and discrimination, shaping his lifelong commitment to civil rights.

Rev. Wright carried that philosophy to Virginia Union University, where he became involved in the Virginia civil and human rights movement. After completing his pre-theological training, he studied philosophy and theology at Payne A.M.E. Theological Seminary and Wilberforce University. As a young adult, Rev. Wright served as a pastor in Ohio and South Carolina before moving to Wisconsin in 1960.

Continuing his education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Rev. Wright earned a degree in psychology. As a Ford Fellow, he pursued graduate studies in community relations at the Urban Training Center of Chicago.

Civil Rights Leadership and Public Service

Shortly after arriving in Madison in the early 1960s, Rev. Wright and his wife, Jacqueline, constructed and established Jackie and Jimmy’s Beauty and Barbershop, becoming Black business owners.

A pioneering civil rights leader, Rev. Wright played a key role in advocating for Madison’s Equal Opportunities Ordinance. He initially served as a member of the Equal Opportunities Commission before being appointed its Executive Director, a position he held for 24 years until his retirement in 1992. During his leadership, he spearheaded the development of the City’s first affirmative action ordinance and implemented a complaint resolution process that provided remedies for victims of discrimination. Madison’s Equal Opportunities Ordinance became one of the most comprehensive civil rights laws in the country.

Ministry and Community Involvement

From 1960 to 1984, Rev. Wright served as an associate minister at Mt. Zion Baptist Church under the late Reverend Joe E. Dawson. He was also a guest and interim minister at churches throughout the Midwest, including an extended stint at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Beloit, Wisconsin.

A dedicated advocate for equity, Rev. Wright was active in numerous professional, civil rights, and community organizations, including:

- Founder & Past President – National Institute for Employment Equity
- President – Madison Association of American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin
- Member – National Association of Human Rights Workers
- Member – International Personnel Managers Association
- Member – NAACP
- Charter Member – Gamma Gamma Gamma Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Incorporated
- Founding Member – Madison Urban League

Awards & Recognitions

Throughout his lifetime, Rev. Wright received numerous awards for his leadership and service, including:

- Citizen of the Year – Madison Newspaper Guild (1966)
- U.S. Civil Service Commission Executive Award (1970)
- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Humanitarian Award – City of Madison (1978)
- Unsung Hero Award – NAACP Madison Branch (1980s)
- Ebony Expressions Distinguished Man Award (1995)

In 1990, Rev. Wright became the full-time pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the largest African American congregation in Dane County, serving until his passing in 1995.

In recognition of his lifelong impact, the City built and named James Coleman Wright Middle School in his honor. As a magnet school, the school and its scholars continue Rev. Wright's legacy of education, leadership, and community empowerment.