

Living in the Fishbowl and Beyond:

An Oral History of Miriam Faulcon Phillips

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Throughout her life, Miriam Faulcon Phillips has been many things to many people. In addition to being a mother and wife, Miriam has also been a writer, an activist, a social worker, an organizer, and the wife of a dynamic and loved pastor: Reverend O.G Phillips of West Medford's Shiloh Baptist Church. She is remembered fondly as a teacher, a leader, a helper, and someone with an incredible sense of open-handed generosity. Somehow, Miriam has been able to successfully take on all of these roles, often simultaneously, and along with her husband, Rev. Oscar G. Phillips, has helped to enhance the lives of many individuals throughout the West Medford community, as well as in other parts of the United States – and indeed the world. Her dedication to the many struggles that characterized the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s has earned her a great deal of respect amongst the Baptist religious and African American communities that go beyond the greater Boston area. Yet at the same time she remained profoundly attached to her local community in West Medford, working for change in the schools, the churches, and in the housing authority for the city in which she spent most of her adult life.

Originally from Haverhill, Massachusetts, Miriam Faulcon came to West Medford when she married Rev. Oscar G Phillips in 1954. She and her brother were born in the 1910s and lived in Haverhill until they became adults. Miriam first moved to Boston to work, and then to West Medford following her marriage. Before moving to West Medford, Miriam had already begun her career as a draftsman and an activist. Reverend Lois Pinton, a friend and colleague, recalled that Miriam's work for racial equality began at a very early age:

Across the street [from where she lived as a child], one of her best friends was a little white girl. And that girl became the grandmother of one of the women who was a student with me in CPE [as an adult]...¹ [There was also] some white kid [who] was bothering her in school and calling her names. And she kind of dragged him by his ear home to his mother and told her what he was doing. She was determined.

Her determination brought numerous accomplishments and achievements in a wide variety of areas. She initially went to college and received technical certificates in Display Art and Engineering Drawing from the Wagner School of Art. With these credentials, Miriam was able to secure a job as a draftsman in the Finished Plans Department at the Boston Navy Yard during the Second World War. Like many young women during the war, Miriam was able to step into a career that had been dominated by men. While she did not stay long at the Navy Yard, she continued to use her artistic skills in other jobs that she held throughout her career.

After the war, in the late 1940s, Miriam went to work for the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts as the Secretary for the World Missions Department. In this capacity she was able to actively retain her commitment to the church, which was always a priority. She writes in her 1987 memoir: “Religion has always been a sustaining force for me since early childhood. The church has been my main source of both social and spiritual nurture, and I cannot remember when it has not been a high priority” (*Gentle Wisdom from The Fishbowl*, 8).

¹ CPE, or Clinical Pastoral Education, was the program Rev. Phillips directed at Tewksbury State and Boston City Hospitals while a faculty member at Andover Newton Theological Seminary.

In addition to working for the American Baptist Churches, she also used the church as a way to further the Civil Rights cause. Often, churches would act as central places for organizing people, especially African Americans, around social justice issues. The Civil Rights movement had at its root the churches in which people, who had already found a community, could begin the process of working toward a collective goal. Through her home church and a group called the Color Caravan, Miriam began to promote racial equality when she was a teenager in the 1940s, at the very beginning of the Civil Rights struggle. She described this group as an early effort to bring understanding between young people of different ethnic and racial groups who were active in the Baptist Churches in Massachusetts (*Fishbowl*, 26). In spite of what she called its token qualities, she admits that it had a profound impact on her, and notes that on occasion that when she would meet other former members, “It [was] always a joy to renew acquaintances, reminisce about our early struggles against racism, and compare notes on how they influenced the direction of our lives. For each of us it left an indelible imprint” (*Fishbowl*, 26). In Miriam’s case this imprint led to work with larger organizations within the Civil Rights movement after the movement began to gain more power and influence.

Miriam wrote a fair amount in her memoir about her life as a girl growing up in Haverhill in a white neighborhood and her experiences as a minority in a time of segregation. From an early age, Miriam remembers having “a tendency to be concerned about people, who from [her] viewpoint were being unjustly treated” (*Fishbowl*, 27). A forthright child, Miriam recalls in her writing that she befriended the underdogs among her peers on numerous occasions (*Fishbowl*, 28). These early experiences helped to

shape her participation in the Civil Rights movement, in both its religious and its secular aspects.

It was through her work in the Baptist church in downtown Boston that she met her future husband, Rev. Oscar Phillips, in the early 1950s. In her memoir she tells a story that indicates how central religion was to their relationship:

The statement that OG made as he slipped the symbol of our engagement onto my finger did not sound at all unreasonable.

“There is one thing that you must understand. Although I love you more than anyone else in the world, my first commitment will always be to God.” I would have been disappointed if he had felt any other way, because I, too, consider my first commitment to God. I had taken for granted that he had the same feeling.

(Fishbowl 8)

Their commitment to God and the church was extremely important. It led both Miriam and OG to confront many difficult questions that most people were unwilling to address. Their long-time friend Judge Marie Jackson mentions that they were very active in helping unwed mothers in the 1950s. They would take in these women and give them a place to live until their children were born, and would sometimes continue to help them until the women were able to establish themselves. Eventually this led to an effort to set up a program for unwed mothers at a hospital.² Judge Jackson notes that this love for families and children was very important to the Phillipses. Miriam’s dedication to people in difficult situations and her need to help others also led her to her critical work within

² I do not have the name of the hospital or the date.

the Civil Rights movement. This continued even after her experiences with the Color Caravan as a teenager that were mentioned above.

As part of her commitment both to her church and to the Civil Rights movement, Miriam was deeply involved in a program to bring young Black ministers to preach or speak about racial issues in larger churches. Lois Pinton recalls some of Miriam's stories about this program, which was an effort to help American Baptists understand the struggles that were taking place in order to achieve equality. Rev. Pinton explains:

Through the '50s, the race relations—and Martin Luther King was at [Boston University], and Miriam knew Martin Luther King, and got together I guess, with some of the young adults from the churches of Boston. So they were there in their community to bring some sanity, to work with the schools.

This work with Martin Luther King and his wife Coretta continued after the Kings went back to the segregated South. Judge Jackson described Miriam as often reminiscing about the aftermath of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and about how she and OG had helped to take up a collection at the Shiloh Baptist Church in West Medford to send money to the people in the South. Miriam and the Kings carried on a correspondence for some time, and the Shiloh was always kept abreast of what was happening in the larger Civil Rights struggle.

Miriam and OG's work ultimately helped to heal some of the wounds opened as a result of the racial tensions in the West Medford community, as well as at the national level. Miriam's work with King and other leaders of the Civil Rights movement brought

home the importance of desegregation as a way to help combat the racism by which many people in West Medford were victimized. Through the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts and another organization that attracted many women from West Medford, Church Women United, Miriam was able to help the church in its goal of integrating the Baptist churches in Massachusetts.

Lois Pinton explains that as an important part of their culture many Black churches are dually aligned with the American Baptist Churches and other religious groups, such as the Methodist Church. These churches were often racially segregated, and as a result were in a tenuous position within either denomination. Miriam and OG, however, wanted to work to end racial segregation and bring increased harmony among Baptist people regardless of race. Dual alignment was an important part of the traditional culture of some Black churches, but the Shiloh Baptist Church was somewhat of an anomaly because it was exclusively affiliated with the American Baptist Church. Lois explains that they used this unique status in the ways in which they worked with the denomination: *“They wanted to work with the denomination to bring integration, to bring understanding of racial differences. And they put their hearts into that. That was a big piece of their work throughout their entire career, but certainly at the beginning.”*

To achieve that goal, Miriam was involved deeply in both religious and secular organizations dedicated to the cause. Longtime friend Evelyn Tyner remembers her role in the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). When asked what her role in the organization was, Evelyn replied rhetorically, *“What do people do with civil rights organizations? She did everything.”* She implied that Miriam was involved in a leadership capacity, organizing various groups of people, and helping in many ways to

further the cause of equality both in her own local community as well as in the larger world.

Her commitment to the cause remained strong even after she married and began to raise a family. In fact, her children's experience with school segregation became another moment in which Miriam was able to use her considerable talent for leadership and organization. Rev. Pinton recalls that Miriam's activism during the controversy over busing in the public schools in Medford allowed her children and those of others in the community a greater opportunity for access to a good quality education:

They [Miriam and OG] were involved in the schools as parents, as well as community leaders... When their children were young, they were first at a school that was quite a distance from their house. And they, one day—I don't know if it was Miriam or Peter [their children]—walked home and they [Miriam and OG] were appalled. So they got their neighborhood school established, and it was, at least when I was there, kind of a magnet for the Medford Public Schools.

This ability to react to and ultimately benefit from otherwise difficult experiences stayed with Miriam not only in her life as a community organizer but also in her professional career.

Miriam achieved tremendous success as she moved through the ranks of the American Baptist Churches leadership committees and eventually earned a place on the Board of Trustees at Andover Newton Theological School . Later, in addition to holding the time-consuming job of Church Secretary for the Shiloh Baptist Church, Miriam was

also a Commissioner of the Medford Housing Authority in the 1970s, at a time when increased attention was being paid to housing reform in cities across the nation.

As well as occupying the position of Church Secretary Miriam was involved in many other aspects of her husband's ministry. People in the community often commented on the fact that theirs was a shared ministry. Evelyn Tyner recalls:

I tell you, that lady, [OG's] ministry became so good because of her. She knew, she understood the denomination very, very much and she did all kinds of things to help him grow. And he did, he grew...It was a real partnership. You know, the people in the denomination downtown, they used to call them a real pair. A Baptist pair.

Because of her work with the denomination, Miriam was able to help Shiloh achieve a prominent place among the Baptist churches in Massachusetts. She was involved with a wide variety of Baptist groups and was able to bring other members of the congregation into leadership positions within the larger organization. One of those women was Evelyn Tyner. In our conversation, she credited Miriam with her own positions and level of activity in the Baptist Church:

EVELYN: She introduced me to Baptist Women. And then I became very, very involved. In fact I became the president of the American Baptist Women in Massachusetts because of her.

LEONA: You went a lot of places.

TARYN: *Because of her?*³

EVELYN: *Well, everything I did I did because she showed me how to do things. How to relate to the Baptist people, how to really be a Baptist. Because I didn't know how to be a Baptist. I was a Catholic girl. (Laughter)*

GWYNNE: *How did she teach you that?*

EVELYN: *Well, I don't know how she taught me. She, I mean, she would... I don't know how she taught it to me. But I mean I became very familiar with all of the things that happened in the Baptist church through her.*

Evelyn and her daughter Leona are not the only ones who recall Miriam's dedication and commitment to the Baptist Church. Rev. Pinton explains that Miriam's energy, equal to that of her husband, allowed both halves of this Baptist pair to accomplish a great deal in the community:

The man never rested, and Miriam was the same way. If that woman ever got four hours of sleep a night, that was a lot. She was up doing the newsletter. When I was at Shiloh, she had been working on her Bachelor's degree at UMass, and then got her Master's in Creative Writing. And she started writing a book, I don't know... all about the life of a pastor's wife... Talk about a capable wife, that thing in Proverbs 31, Miriam did it all. I mean, she took care of... they had foster children. OG's off doing all this other stuff, of course, Miriam's at home taking care of the house, taking care of the kids, taking kids with her.

³ Taryn Miller-Stevens, a co-interviewer, and Leona Martin, Evelyn Tyner's daughter, were also present for this interview.

Miriam was able to create and organize her home life for her family while also participating at all levels in the Shiloh church as well as with the denomination. In many ways, Miriam did represent what was required in Proverbs 31, which was a passage that became a recurring theme in her drive to succeed in all that she did. The passage that Rev. Pinton referred to is Proverbs 31: 10-31:

She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from afar. She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and tasks for her maidens... She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong. She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night... She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet... Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land... Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

This passage is worth quoting at length, as it was a driving force in the way Miriam saw her work and her life. In her memoir, she writes a great deal about her struggles to achieve this sort of perfection: “I must admit that like most people I am guilty of secret aspirations for perfection, and that as a wife I have spent some thoughtful moments trying to justify my lack of qualifications for the precious jewel simile” (*Fishbowl 1*).

Even with her activities in the church, Miriam was able to balance her home life with her work, and did her best to live up to the description above. She was very committed to her family and always made certain that she took care of her children, Miriam and Peter, as well as any others who might have been living with the family at a given time. OG’s nephew David Phillips lived with Miriam and OG when he first moved to the United States from Jamaica. He remembers that she always was able to take care of the family, even when she was traveling for her work with the denomination:

She made sure that the family was really really taken care of. And whatever number of days she was gone for she would cook and store and label all these things. So in the fridge it would be Sunday morning or Wednesday dinner. The entire time she was gone, she cooked prior to and froze and labeled everything. So it was just a case of you coming and picking the day and eating that day’s meal. That was very remarkable in my book. My uncle was so much on the run that sometimes he didn’t want to be eating there, and this made her very upset because she wanted to make sure he ate properly.

David remembers the way in which she cared for people as one of her defining characteristics. Although his uncle wanted to eat the food Miriam had made, OG was incredibly busy with his own work, and often resorted to whatever he could find that did not require even the minimal preparation that Miriam's system entailed.

Miriam's organized caretaking extended to include her mother: Evelyn Tyner remembers that Miriam moved her mother into the house when she was no longer able to take care of herself. Miriam cared for her mother until she was 100 years old. Then the Phillipses decided that her care would be better provided for by moving her up to Tewksbury Hospital, where they would be able to visit on a regular basis. Miriam's mother lived until she was 107 years old. Caring for an elderly relative would have required a tremendous deal of time and attention, and Miriam wanted to be sure that her mother was well cared for to the end of her life, both in her own home and later at Tewksbury.

Another aspect of her dedication to her family revolved around her children. Peter and the younger Miriam were both adopted as infants, seven years apart. Evelyn Tyner became Peter's godmother. She explained that the children were able to do a lot of things for themselves at an early age because of Miriam's abilities as a teacher.

I tell you, Miriam was... she was a good teacher, she was a good parent, she was a good... everything she did, she did well. And she sort of trained people as she went along... She was amazing... She was a great organizer.

Peter, now an accountant, has two children of his own with his wife who is originally from England. As a youngster he was known throughout the neighborhood as a child who wanted to be like his father when he grew up. He would often dress in suits like OG and enjoyed the mentoring and attention he received from the men in the community. His sister Miriam, seven years younger, is now an electrician. As a child, she was a helper to both of her parents and was well known for her talent in fixing neighborhood bicycles. Judge Marie Jackson, a close friend of the family, remembered that people, young and old, would line up in front of their home so that Miriam would be able to have a look at their bikes. Both children were very active in the church, and would take part in the pageants and plays that their mother wrote for Christmas and Easter. As a family, they all enjoyed fishing, and would often go out for ice cream in the summers in order to check in with one another. Judge Jackson also remembered that there were, in addition to children, always pets around, and that while OG had a fondness for the dogs, Miriam was devoted to the cats who lived with them.

Miriam continued to care for and organize the lives of her family members until finally her own aging process slowed her down. Family was extremely important to all of the Phillipses, and they remained active and involved in one another's lives for a very long time. As she looked back over her life in her memoir, Miriam was concerned about the notion of growing old gracefully. She wrote:

As my time draws near, I realize that growing old gracefully involves more than one's hair color. Gracefulness also needs to be reckoned with when it comes to physical adeptness. Recently my son offered to give me a lift to the garage where

my car was waiting to be picked up after repairs. It was not until I was confronted with his little two-door compact Chevy that I realized that in this case his offer of a lift meant really helping to lift me into the tiny space allotted to a passenger. As I tried to decide which part of me should be squeezed in first, and as he instructed me to just swing my feet around, I wondered how successful I could hope to be at growing old gracefully” (*Fishbowl* 71).

Her dry and down to earth sense of humor displayed in this passage helped her with the process. As she and OG aged, they had to address their increasing frailty, and were able to do so in such a way as to allow them the best possible quality of life. For Miriam, “old age is evidently as much a state of mind as physical condition and appearance” (*Fishbowl* 76), and as a result of this attitude, she is still seen by her friends as the dynamic woman she always was.

In addition to being a great organizer Miriam was also very much a lover of literature and writing. After her children were raised and she had a little more time, Miriam took on yet another project: to earn a Master of Arts degree in writing, an activity she had always loved. Even before she got the degree, and while she was taking care of a houseful of people, David Phillips remembered her using her talents when possible, both in her work as well as for her own personal fulfillment:

The church kept her very busy, plus her own things that she was doing. And I guess that’s when she was doing a little bit here and there, writing a little here and there. But she was very quiet about it. Quiet. In other words she didn’t

make these announcements at the dinner table that she was writing anything, but you always knew she was writing stuff.

Ultimately, as a result of her love for learning and literature she received her Master's degree in English composition in 1987 from the University of Massachusetts, Boston – a rare accomplishment for anyone, male or female, Black or white. She earned her degree after she had been heavily involved in many different organizations devoted to the church and community. In the midst of her daily duties, this dedication to her education was truly remarkable.

Although it is true of most people, Miriam's life very clearly reflects the times in which she lived. In a piece she wrote for a life writing class at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Miriam noticed the connection between ordinary people and the times in which they lived as she told the story of a woman named Nana Jewell from West Medford. Nana Jewell and her mother were contemporaries, and in this story these older women would have coffee fellowship at the parsonage on a regular basis. She writes, "I liked the idea of Mom enjoying the company of these contemporaries, as they reminisced and relived some of the experiences that had actually shaped history, not realizing how much they contributed to it" (*A Rare Jewel*, 3). The same could be said of herself, shown through her passion for equality and justice, working in her various jobs and activities.

Her achievements and accomplishments were numerous. A final important piece of her work revolved around the issue of housing. In Medford, she held a place on the city's housing authority for many years, and for part of her tenure in the position, she held the chairmanship of this city agency. Like so many others, the Housing Authority

recognized the depth of her commitment to her community and honored her in such a way that Miriam Phillips' legacy will continue to hold a place not only in the hearts of people, but also in the built environment of her hometown. There is now a Housing Authority building in Medford, just off of High Street, named after Miriam. Her generosity and spirit impacted members of the community at all levels, and it is a fitting tribute that this woman who was so dedicated to providing a home for those she loved is remembered through a building dedicated to helping give others homes of their own.

Now Miriam lives in a nursing home. She is frail and in her 90s, but she is still able to participate in a lot of activities sponsored by the home. Evelyn and Leona described her life in this new home. Leona began by telling a story of a recent visit:

When we went to see her not long ago, I was surprised that she could recognize me pretty well. And then a year before, or two years before when she came to [a tea that was held at the church]... She sat beside me, and there was someone way over by the window. And she's looking and she's saying, "Isn't that so and so?" And I said, "Yeah, I guess it is." They say she can't see well, but she certainly saw who that was. And she knew who I was.

EVELYN: She's an active, she's alive. I mean, even though... there's so much less stuff that she can do, she still is alive... Yeah, but she's so funny. A club we belong to went out there to have lunch with her. And they fixed it all, they did everything... Yeah, they had a beautiful lunch for us and she's sitting up there controlling everything. I mean, it's like...

LEONA: *She was at the meeting. She was there more than in body. She was at the meeting and had questions to ask.*

This sort of active engagement in every aspect of her life is something that characterizes Miriam Phillips well. In spite of the sheer amount of the activities in which she participated, Miriam was able to do them all well and to play a genuine role not only in her husband's ministry, but also in many of the movements that characterized the times in which she lives. Her activities touched many lives, from the people closest to her in her family, to the members of the Shiloh Baptist Church, and to those she met in her travels, both domestically and abroad.

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