

Gwynne Langley
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Interviews: see end

*NB: Reverend Phillips passed away on September 4, 2005.
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O.G. Phillips

Even at his advanced age and in frail health, the Reverend Dr. Oscar G. Phillips is still a pastor. As those who best know him describe, Reverend Phillips continues to act in the same role he has always played in his community: ministering to the people around him, offering comfort and support to those in need. His community is no longer that of the Shiloh Baptist Church in West Medford, in which he was the much-loved and longest-serving pastor for forty three years. It is now a ward in the nursing home where he lives and receives treatment for Alzheimer's disease. Yet his nephew David Phillips describes him as still ministering:

He's still a very pleasant person. When you first went to greet him, you would not know that he doesn't know you. Because he would greet you with jubilation and open arms... he would reach out and help...always with the patients and stuff like that. When he got there, I don't know if he still thought he was minister, I'm not sure. But when he got there, he would talk to all the patients... I interpreted this as [his] calling. Even though he served so many years [at Shiloh]. With these people [on the Alzheimer's ward]... I thought it was genuine. He would reach all these old people.

David saw this tendency to reach out to people and his jubilation and open arms as an indication that Reverend Phillips was and always would be a minister, with a true dedication to others in every aspect of his life. His ability to reach the people with whom he lives comes as no surprise, as Reverend Phillips had been deeply involved in hospital ministry since he first came to Medford in November, 1950. In addition to serving in West Medford, “OG” – as he was popularly known – also directed the Clinical Pastoral Education program at Tewksbury State Hospital and Boston City Hospital through Andover Newton Theological School, where he was a faculty member. He also acted as Director of Training at the Boston Counseling Center, a program run through Tremont Temple Baptist Church in Boston. Throughout his career, OG received innumerable honors and awards for his work in his community as well as for his larger leadership roles within the American Baptist Churches and the American Association of Pastoral Counselors. In spite of all of the awards and recognition, though, OG is remembered as a humble, down to earth man. Reverend Lois Pinton, a former student and intern of his during his later years at Andover Newton, remembers first meeting him in the 1980s, at the height of his career. She was a student in the Clinical Pastoral Education program at Andover Newton and worked with him in that program for several semesters. Later she also served a pastoral internship at Shiloh Baptist Church:

He was very dignified and compassionate and caring person... I saw him as the director, he had his doctorate, and he was in charge of the Clinical Pastoral Education program there at Boston City for the group that I was in, and then I knew he was at the Tewksbury Hospital doing the same thing. And I was kind of

intimidated... But soon after you find out that he's very down to earth. As I said, very compassionate, very exacting, but a whole lot of fun. But the dignity! There were times when I would go to the church... I first went to Shiloh and saw him as the pastor there, it was a whole different atmosphere, and again I was kind of taken aback. But he was still the same old ordinary person when you sit down to talk to him.

Reverend Phillips was loved by his congregation for these traits. Although his impressive credentials did not go unnoticed by his congregation, these were not the most important aspects of who he was as a minister, or as an individual. Throughout his career OG was dedicated to the individuals he served, both as a pastoral counselor at Tewksbury, as well as in his ministerial duties at Shiloh Baptist Church. His dedication to people was fostered at an early age, through the influence of his mother and others who helped to instill in him a sense of connection to his community.

Although he spent the majority of his adult life in Medford, OG Phillips was not a native of Massachusetts. He grew up in Jamaica, in the state of Portland, on the north coast of the island. His father worked as a pharmacist and was Chairperson of the Parochial Board, a local governing body. His mother worked as an architect, a very unusual profession for a woman at the time. OG grew up with a brother and four sisters. All of his siblings were actively engaged in the work of the church, either through an official capacity, or as lay leaders. One of OG's sisters moved to Canada and is a lay leader in her church there, one went to Illinois and worked as a minister before returning to Jamaica, and another moved to Africa to work as a missionary and later married a local

leader there. OG's brother, David Phillips' father, still lives in Jamaica and is active in his church as a lay leader as well.

David alluded to his grandmother's strong will and deep faith as an influence on her children:

She was very aggressive in what she was doing... She knew what she wanted and she pretty much told [the contractors with whom she worked] what she wanted and I guess she got what she wanted. So she was very strong, very strong willed, very strong willed. She was also... well my entire family had very strong religious ties. My aunt, she was a minister of the church. My grandmother was very very vocal, very vocal, and very supportive of her.

David went on to say more about his grandmother, OG's mother. As we discussed the influence she might have had on OG, David brought up a story about his grandmother that he remembered hearing as a child:

She was... Very loving, very very strong willed person. I'm told that there was a story where she was riding a horse, and for some unknown reason the horse decided to gallop. Rather than pull the reins to stop the horse, she went for the horse's neck and just held on to the neck. The horse stopped, I think he was a little frightened.

To grow up in this loving and stable home gave OG not only a sense of who he was and what he could accomplish, but also helped to instill in him a strong work ethic. Lois Pinton described the way in which he left his family in Jamaica after he had made the decision to leave his home country for Panama:

He didn't tell his family until the last minute, so that he was on the boat waving goodbye, and then he sat down and cried the rest of the way. But he worked in a hospital in Panama. He worked with soldiers in the military hospital. And he would get up in the morning, he'd swab the floors, he'd empty all of the bedpans and the sputum cups, he'd change all of the beds and he'd clean up all the patients, and by 10 in the morning he was taking a nap. Well you know, this was not de rigueur, but no one worked like OG. And so the head nurse would cover for him every time. He wants to take a rest, he takes a rest. He wants to eat, he eats. This guy, he just— that was always his way. He was never too proud to do anything.

His work ethic would serve him for the rest of his life. After he came to Medford, his energy shifted from focusing on peoples' physical needs to a focus on their spiritual needs. This dedication and drive came through in the many ways in which he served his communities in Medford, Andover-Newton Theological School, and the Clinical Pastoral Education programs that he supervised.

From Panama, OG went to Marshall, Texas, to begin his seminary training at Bishop College. While he was there, OG was both a full-time student, and helped to

provide religious education to children in the rural parts of Texas. He and a few fellow students set up a Sunday school, and while they would collect money to be used for supplies, OG and his classmates refused to take a salary. His generosity landed him in a somewhat precarious situation in the postwar South. Lois recalled that OG used to tell this story about his Sunday School experiences:

The FBI caught wind of the fact that he was not taking a salary and yet he was doing all this work. So they assumed that he must be a communist... So the guy comes out, sets up his typewriter, tip-tap... and he says, "What is your name and where do you come from and why won't you take any salary?" And so OG started talking, and pretty soon the guy wasn't typing any more. He was fascinated, listening to OG tell him all about the children and how they would give their pennies, and how they would do this, do that, and that was why he wasn't taking a salary or anything. And the guy and packed up his suitcase and shifted his hat. "Reverend Phillips, it's an honor to have met you."

By the time he arrived in Medford in 1950, these and many other stories had become part of OG's repertoire. He would bring them out regularly and on several different occasions. They served as reminders not only of where he came from, but also of his own conviction that life should be approached with a sense of humor. His humor was one of the qualities that stood out for many people. Evelyn Tyner and her daughter Leona Martin came to Shiloh because of Rev. Phillips' ministry. As a result, Evelyn became a close family friend and was heavily involved in the work of the church. Both

of them remembered the zest and humor that characterized OG. They also recalled that he had a fondness for balloons and joking with people in any situation. Laughing, they recalled this very playful part of his sense of humor. Evelyn started the memory when her daughter prompted her to talk about the ways in which OG interacted with the people in the church. “*Oh, no,*” Evelyn said, shaking her head and laughing. “*If he saw a balloon, he would take a pin and break it.*” Leona continued:

There was some party that you had at the other church. And I bought a big, big, you know, a great big bouquet of balloons. And the next thing I know, here he comes with a pin! Pop! And he laughed, oh! And then he did another one. I said, “Do you know how much I paid for those balloons?” He liked to burst balloons.

In the midst of the fun and games, OG was also very dedicated to his work. The energy that was expressed in his sense of fun and play was also manifested in the amount of work he did and in the time he gave to others. David Phillips expressed this when he said:

For him church and community were twenty four hours. All the time, all the time. As a matter of fact, he— I think he slept more times in his chair, because at any moment the phone would go off. The police would call, he would be there... the hospital would call, the morgue would call, whatever. It seemed to be where he most was needed... right there. He would sit in that lounge chair, fall asleep and

the phone would ring at any moment. There were many many trips with him, very very late at night. Up to the hospital... So at any moment, especially at Tewksbury, because at Tewksbury there were a lot of people who didn't have families, apparently at the time I guess it was a hospital for alcoholics and unwed mothers... So people there really didn't have family. So he would get a call at night and somebody was dying. So he would go. Many times it was so late at night, sometimes the weather was so bad that I would accompany him. We would go up there and just be with that person, you know, in prayer.

It did not seem to matter to Rev. Phillips if he was tired, or if the weather was bad, David and Lois both insisted. For him what was important was that he was continuing his mission to the community and carrying out the work to which he felt called. As a result, he passed on his high standards to his students in the CPE program and his interns at Shiloh, and gave them the confidence to take on many challenges. Lois fondly recalled a defining moment in which OG helped her to realize her capabilities:

I could play the piano. I never played in public because I was too nervous to play it, so it was just something I did for myself. Well, I made the mistake of telling him once... So the next Wednesday we got to prayer meeting, he said, "Well we have a piano player now for our prayer meeting." I would die. I started with just sometimes playing the melody line, but I tell you now, I can sit down at the piano and play these hymns. I can play them even with other people around. And that was kind of a part of his way of giving people to it. Because it didn't matter

whether you were polished... And it didn't make any difference how you stumbled. He was there to encourage you and assist you through it.

In addition to offering this sort of support and encouragement to his students, OG also provided the same sort of care for people in the community, regardless of whether or not they were official members of the Shiloh church. Evelyn Tyner and her family were Catholic and attended Mass at the Catholic church in West Medford. Yet her daughter Leona Martin also attended Baptist Youth Fellowship at Shiloh in the evenings. She remembered it being very difficult to be one of the few African American Catholics in the neighborhood, and received pressure from the nuns to avoid non-Catholics:

He helped me to not pay attention to the nuns telling me “you don't go to other peoples' churches, you don't date Protestant boys, and you don't do that”... when I started, the only ones I knew outside my brother and the guy down the street who became a priest, they were the only ones who were Catholic. Everybody else was Protestant. It was a dilemma. But he was— his presence and what... his community work was what drew us in. And it was not a bad thing. He was very inspirational.

The amount of interaction with different people in the community was also a very important aspect of Rev. Phillips' ministry. In spite of the potential isolation that the community could have faced, Shiloh was an open place, and often, leaders and other people from outside the congregation would be invited. As West Medford was an

enclave for African Americans, it would have been easy for the community to be ignored by the larger city of Medford, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, when integration was just beginning to receive a large push from different groups within the city and nation. For Evelyn and Leona, OG's dedication to opening up the community stood out foremost in their memories: "*He just was a community person and he came into this community and he livened it up. He got the boys out of trouble, he did all kinds of great things that were really worthwhile,*" Evelyn told me. Leona added:

And he brought a lot of... his friends from Andover Newton and he made it a multicultural situation. It's a black church, but it became rather multicultural with a lot of new people he drew into the church. He did community things, he interfaced with the rest of the community and so that other community people would come into his church. But he did bring a lot of Baptist ministers that were interns here. He supervised their internships while they were going through Shiloh. And at the same time that he was doing all that, he also served as a chaplain up there at that hospital.

For OG, the community and the church were parts of the same whole, and his dedication to both of those things came through abundantly in all aspects of his career. Much of his work focused on giving the church a greater role in both the American Baptist Church association as well as in the city of Medford as a whole.

He was not alone in these efforts. After he took the pulpit at Shiloh, OG met Miriam Faulcon, a dynamic woman who was at different times a draftsman at the

Boston Navy Yard, a writer, and a leader both in the churches and in the civil rights movement. She held a job in the American Baptist Church's World Missions department before the two were married, and following the marriage, became Shiloh's secretary. They married in 1954, and Miriam became an integral part of his ministry. Lois Pinton described her as his equal in energy and commitment:

The ministry was theirs together. He could never have done what he did without her. Of course in the Black churches the pastor's wife was always called the first lady. She had innumerable things to say about that. Neither one of them did pomp or circumstance or position, status. They were there to work, to do the work that the community needed. To care for people and to make this world to be what it ought to be.

The couple worked tirelessly for their community and for the American Baptist Church more broadly.

In the midst of their work within the community, OG and Miriam also raised a son and daughter. Family was extremely important to both of them, and they often brought in relatives and friends to live with them for certain lengths of time. Their children were adopted as infants. Peter came first, followed seven years later by their daughter Miriam. Both children became an integral part of the life of the community, as well as important members of the Phillips family. The children were as involved in the church as their parents, attending Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. Judge Marie Jackson remembers that as she grew up, Miriam often became her father's right

hand, helping him in his work and keeping him organized. She was also known as the neighborhood bicycle repair person. Peter was also very close to his father and used to wish to dress up in suits in order to look just like OG. Peter and Miriam also caught on very quickly to both of their parents' incredible teaching abilities. Evelyn Tyner, Peter's godmother, remembers him as a very capable child, even in his early years:

[Miriam] used to leave him with me occasionally when she would go out. And she would leave me with stuff to do with him and tell me all this kind of stuff that I needed to do for him, but I never got to do it with him because he did it himself. She trained him!...Young, he was very young. But she was a teacher, and whatever she touched she taught.

The importance they placed on teaching their children to be self-sufficient and independent carried through in their overall work. OG and Miriam were strong believers not only in the power of love, but in the importance of bettering oneself and in living up to one's potential. This value carried through very strongly in much of their community work.

In addition to raising a family, Miriam was heavily involved in the civil rights movement and the politics of the 1950s and 1960s. She worked more visibly for the cause than OG, but his efforts were also felt in the community. As key leaders, the two of them used their position in West Medford to affect a tremendous amount of change. Judge Marie Jackson, a close personal friend of OG and Miriam's in their later years, as

well as a member of the Shiloh Baptist Church, remembered very clearly the central role that OG and Miriam gave the church in community life:

And the church, everything was there. The activities, the children's programs, the programs for adults, Bible study, First Night services, Kwanzaa services, Easter egg hunts, early morning Easter service – you name it! Everything was there. Political meetings. Everything was there. It was the center [of the West Medford community].

Although it is to be expected that many of the church's activities would revolve around the religious calendar, and indeed they did, the church also served as a community forum. People who wanted to speak to the members of the West Medford community would do so at the church, and often Miriam and OG Phillips had a pivotal role in organizing those events. David Phillips specifically remembered meetings in which candidates for local political offices were offered the opportunity to get to know this community that was often segregated by race from the rest of Medford:

They would invite, especially in local elections, they would invite the candidates there, so that they could come and talk. They brought it into the community. You know, the candidates were always talking elsewhere, all of the time... One of the things they would do, was the church would always invite them. That was like a platform for them. They would come to the church and they would talk. And also,

when a bill was going, certain bills, not everything... if it was somehow related to our community—should be aware of—then we would have people talk about it.

David did not remember OG as being overtly political, or vocal about his political viewpoints, but knew that the Reverend still understood the prominence of the church in peoples' lives at all levels and worked to make it open and accessible. Through his leadership and commitment, the church became a place where the community could meet and discuss a number of different subjects that had tremendous influence on their lives. From the time he accepted the call at Shiloh, this dedication to the community was paramount. When he graduated from seminary at Andover-Newton, he made a pact with a few other fellow seminarians to stay their whole careers at their first calling. Lois Pinton explained why OG had made that decision:

He felt that, for him, once he got to Shiloh, it was a small church. But he realized that this was a church that if the pastor didn't stay and develop it, it would be students and there would be new pastors all the time and it would never really have a chance to grow.

In spite of the fact that OG had the potential to become a great leader within the larger system of Baptist churches, he very consciously decided to devote his energies and efforts into helping to develop a stable community in West Medford. His care for the people in the church was always there, and even before he became an established

member of the community in West Medford, he understood the value of contributing to the community's growth as a stable and nurturing place.

OG Phillips was fundamentally a religious man, and he viewed his calling as one of helping to nurture the spirits of the members of his congregation. His devotion to this mission was seen in the amount of accommodation that was necessary so that people could participate in the life of the church regardless of their work schedules and family commitments. Lois explained this aspect of Shiloh's culture:

This was a congregation that was just so real. These were people, as OG said, who... one member of the congregation had a pet rat. Not a one you buy in a store, but grew up in a tenement where she played with the rats. And others, they would start prayer meeting at five in the morning because they had to go to work. So they would all just let themselves in the back door of somebody's house and they'd gather around the kitchen table, and they'd start singing and praying, and reading the Scripture or whatever until the person finally came down, and they would have their prayer meeting. They had funerals at night because, of course, people couldn't get off work during the day. So most of the time the wake was held at the church, from six to eight, and then we'd have the funeral from eight to nine or so, and the collation afterwards and the next morning we'd go out to the cemetery for the burial, and whoever could. Usually the whole family would come, but the congregation would gather at night. And that was just a tradition from the time when there was no getting off work for a funeral. But the church adapted... It was by necessity in the earlier years, but the tradition continued. I

don't know if we ever had a daytime funeral unless it was a Saturday. Most of the funerals were at night. In fact, I liked having the wake and funeral right there. I thought it was helpful. And it was in a place where people— this was home. Shiloh was home. It was a good place to be.

Clearly life was not easy for the members of the West Medford community. They faced racial discrimination, economic discrimination, and as the town's demographics and economic base changed in the 1970s and 1980s the community began to reflect that change. Gentrification brought new people into this closely-knit community and forced the third generation of children who had been raised in West Medford to look for jobs and homes elsewhere. But with OG Phillips preaching every Sunday at Shiloh, there was an important element of continuity that the people could hold on to, and they found in Shiloh a place that was safe, where they could both learn and share their experiences.

Now in his 90s, Reverend Oscar George Phillips is not the active and energetic man that the community remembers. He retired from Shiloh Baptist Church in 1993 and moved shortly thereafter into a retirement facility with Miriam. Although now at the end of his life, Reverend Phillips is still vividly remembered and is leaving an incredible legacy to the people of Shiloh Baptist Church and West Medford. All those who spoke about him remember him with great fondness and love. They saw his life's work as one in which he built a strong community, brought people closer together, and furthered the work of the church. For Reverend Phillips, his accomplishment and legacy lies in his devotion to Christianity:

I want to make sure that people understand that the kingdom of God has been furthered on this earth even as it is in heaven through the two of them. And that their leadership has had an impact worldwide. Go to either of the churches there in Medford and you'd have hundreds of people there who would tell you more than I can.

OG's impact was indeed felt by those who spent every Sunday of their lives with him. Evelyn Tyner stated unequivocally, *"He helped us become Christian."* His leadership and teaching helped her to understand and learn more about her adopted faith. Although she came to the Baptist church as an adult, Evelyn credits OG and Miriam's ability to teach and lead with her own successful leadership in larger Baptist organizations.

Her daughter Leona agreed that helping them to become Christian was OG's main task. But he also helped her in much more direct ways when she was an adolescent. He welcomed her to the Baptist community in spite of her Catholic upbringing and helped her to learn important lessons about accepting and being accepted. Overall, though Leona remembers what she calls his presence and his inclusiveness: *"He didn't hesitate to show love."*

Judge Marie Jackson helped Miriam and OG through the ageing process and their transition from their West Medford home. A long term member of the Shiloh Church, she also became a close friend to the Phillipses and supported them with her friendship through those transitions. She believes that OG's greatest legacy lay in the work that he

accomplished through making the church a vital and active part of the West Medford community:

The church was the pivotal center of the community. It really was. Over and above the Community Center, the church was really the center. OG was the neatest guy... He was inclusive, he loved everybody. He didn't have a mean bone or streak in him. He harbored no grudges, he saw the beauty and good in people. He was a person that was just doing good in the community... He didn't broadcast it. He just did good. I don't see how he got the energy to do what he did.

His impact was deeply felt among the members of the congregation, the people who worked within the larger American Baptist Church organization, and his students at Andover Newton Theological School.

When David Phillips, his nephew, reflected on OG's legacy, he could of course appreciate all the good work that his uncle had done and the awards he received for all of his work. But that was not the important thing in David's eyes. Instead, it was OG's example of humility and compassion:

Well, what stuck in my mind was that he always was very humble. And he always for some reason, worked that in. He would make statements like... "Oh Lord, keep me humble... So that if I fall, I won't have far to go." He was always saying things like that. I remember once, on the scholarship committee, the kids who had

excelled and were given some form of a scholarship. I recall him saying that that was very good, but you should never forget those who are struggling. So even though the kids had done well and they were rewarded by some form of scholarship, whatever it was, he told them not to forget those who didn't excel, that they were just as important, if not more important. Because those who do good would probably do good elsewhere, but those who struggle, you have to be there to support them. So I do remember him [being] very humble. That was something that I really noticed, a memory that was there. He was very humble.

The community that OG Phillips devotedly and tirelessly served for such a significant portion of his life is able to carry on with the memory of this man and of the many lives he impacted throughout his own quiet work. His dignity and humility, traits that stood out prominently for both Lois Pinton and David Phillips, helped him to be remembered with respect and admiration. The ways in which members of the community remember him and the stories they tell serve as his longest and most important legacy.

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