

# David Hilliard Eaton



**David Hilliard Eaton** (1932-1992) was born in Washington, D.C., the oldest of five children in the closely-knit family of Harold and Ordee (Scruggs) Eaton. After graduating from D.C.'s Dunbar High School, he attended Howard University (A.B., 1954) and the Boston University School of Theology. While at Boston University he was attracted to Unitarianism but was advised that there was little opportunity for an African American in that overwhelmingly white denomination. He, therefore, entered the Methodist ministry and was ordained in 1957.

He was the first African American to serve as senior minister in a large Unitarian Universalist church. During his tenure, All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington, DC became a center of community service and social action, and was the first congregation within the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) to achieve a racially balanced black and white membership.

## Early Career

After leaving Boston University, having earned both S.T.B. and M. Div. degrees, Eaton founded and served a Methodist church in Pacoima, California. Returning to Washington in 1960, he served successively as men's counselor, registrar and chaplain at Howard University; executive director of the Opportunities Industrialization Center; and dean of student services and associate professor of education at Federal City College. In addition, he hosted *Speakup*, a radio talk show, and, later, the televised *David Eaton Show*.

In 1957 he had married Shirley Yvonne Freeland; the couple had a daughter, Claudia. After the couple separated in 1961, he married Dolores Pike, whom he predeceased. Although Eaton was separated from his daughter during her early years, their relationship became a close one, with each referring to the other as "best friend."

## UU Ministry

In 1969, encouraged by the outgoing UUA president, [Dana McLean Greeley](#), Eaton candidated as minister of All Souls Church, Washington. Its membership was largely white, but the section of the city in which the church was located was undergoing a profound change, with many middle class white families moving to the suburbs. Their places were taken by poorer African American families. Duncan Howlett, Eaton's predecessor, believed that All Souls needed a young African American as its new leader. Moreover, as a powerful and charismatic preacher, Eaton met the needs of this pulpit-centered church.



*All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church  
Washington, D.C.*

Although Eaton received the call, it was not unanimous. Members of the church had raised questions about his qualifications, his lack of ministerial experience, and his Methodist affiliation. Behind these questions lurked uneasiness at having an African American as senior minister.

In May 1970 Eaton's sermon, "Take the Blindfold Off the Lady: The D.C. Crime Bill," caused controversy within the church and the larger community. The Nixon administration had proposed a bill which included a provision that would allow police officers to break into houses without knocking whenever there was "reasonable belief" that evidence would be destroyed or an officer endangered. "If this legislation is passed," said Eaton, "I suggest to you and instruct myself . . . [that] any time persons break into your house unannounced, shoot them!" An audible gasp came from the stunned congregation. "In order to understand true morality," he explained, "one must understand that oppression must be stopped at all cost." He was roundly

denounced by the media. Some forty church members resigned. The board, however, supported him. When the bill was finally passed, important changes were made to protect constitutional rights. Eaton had established himself as strong and effective voice for justice.

During the early years of Eaton's ministry the UUA was torn by a bitter controversy over Black Power, with the racially-exclusive Black UU Caucus (BUUC) demanding control of funds for denominational racial programs, and Black and White Action (BWA), an integrated group, opposing such funding. Eaton managed to steer a middle course, commanding the respect of both sides.

Eaton's preaching and community work attracted a significant number of African Americans to All Souls. During the 1970s the black membership increased from approximately one-quarter to one-half, a level that remained essentially unchanged throughout the remainder of his ministry. There was a corresponding loss of white members, some attracted to the new UU churches in the suburbs, others uncomfortable with the changes in the church's immediate environment, and still others ill at ease in the church's new racial climate.

Although black and white members worked well together in carrying out the business of the church, in less formal activities the two races tended to stay apart. The congregation struggled to move "beyond race," trying to develop a church community in which interpersonal relationships were based on individual qualities rather than on differences of race. This proved an extremely difficult goal, and was only partially achieved. Eaton worked hard to promote understanding of those of differing races and culture, but he recognized early that he and the congregation must inevitably fall short. "We know what life is and what life ought to be," he said. "Many of us are dislocated between the Is and the Ought because we are products of a dislocated period in history. . . . The spiritual challenge is no longer mute, it speaks: 'locate yourself or learn to thrive in dislocation.' I think we need to learn both. . . . May we continue to care."

## Social Action

By the late 1970s, All Souls was a power center for civic politics. There were rumors that Eaton had mayoral ambitions. Under fire for neglecting the church, he announced that he was not running for mayor or any other public office. He subsequently largely restricted his public service to the D.C. School Board, which he served as president. The church, under his leadership, participated in many community programs, including care of the mentally ill, AIDS education, tutoring, and urban renewal (through the All Souls Housing Corporation, organized in 1970). In the early years of Eaton's ministry, the country was divided over many social issues, and the church, under his leadership, often witnessed for social justice—participating in a rally of the National Peace Action Coalition at President Nixon's inauguration, a Solidarity Day march protesting budget cuts in federal social programs, a National March on the White House to Free the Wilmington 10, a large demonstration of the National Sanctuary Movement, and protests against South Africa's racial policies.

Eaton was particularly sensitive to the church's role in the international community. He had visited Ethiopia during one of its periods of famine, traveled to Japan with a U.S. delegation on education and to India on a YMCA board exchange. Through his descriptions of these experiences he sought to make his congregation realize that they were part of a world community.

In 1976, after the "Church Committee," chaired by Senator Frank Church, uncovered secret FBI programs designed to disrupt anti-war and Black Nationalist groups, Eaton and 13 other plaintiffs filed a lawsuit against the FBI, individual agents, and the D.C. Police, arguing that their First Amendment right "to peaceably assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances" had been violated. The Supreme Court upheld the lower courts' rulings in favor of the plaintiffs, who received monetary damages; Eaton received additional damages because of the extent of the governmental intrusion into his civic and church life.

Some parishioners criticized Eaton for time and energy spent outside the church, for his disinterest in denominational affairs, for his role in the controversy over same-sex "unitelement services" and the termination of the contract of Frank Robertson, All Souls' minister of religious education, and for his "free-wheeling" life

style, but no organized opposition to his ministry ever emerged. In the later years some members felt that he had stayed too long, that he was losing his dynamism and growing stale on the job. Eaton confided to friends that he often had similar feelings and perhaps should be moving on. However, the opportunities were limited—there were few UU churches with the prestige of All Souls and fewer prepared to call an African American as their minister. Besides, he had deep roots in the District of Columbia, and it would have been difficult for him socially and spiritually to leave.

## Theology

Theologically, Eaton could be called a "broad liberal," a humanist in a non-doctrinaire sense who believed that religion, in order to be relevant, must be in the business of addressing this-worldly concerns. "To be a Unitarian," he declared, "is to be a humanist," whether theistic or atheistic. Although receiving final fellowship as a UU minister in 1977, he never renounced his Methodist ordination or his roots in the Christian tradition. His prayer, offered immediately before each sermon, was invariably the same: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, my Lord and Redeemer always."

Many of Eaton's theological concerns were church and ministry related. The church, he maintained, "is that institution whose primary purpose is to help people discover, create, and maintain hope in their lives. . . . When people have no hope, they discover hope together, [and] when they cannot discover hope, they create hope together." He was fond of saying that "some of us are clergy, but all of us are ministers" and that "ministry is a process whereby one attempts to bring the best out of him or her self in every situation, thus eliciting the best from the other person or persons." His work as a peacemaker, a force for justice and empowerment, and a proponent of multi-racial respect, in both the church and the larger community, were firmly grounded in his religious beliefs.

During his All Souls ministry Eaton received many honors. Among them were the Holmes-Weatherly Award in 1992 for commitment to social justice and the Clarence Skinner Award in 1985 for his sermon "Racism is Alive and Well," both from the UUA; the Man of the Year Award from the YMCA of Metropolitan Washington in 1990; the Man-of-the-Year Award from the Shiloh Baptist Church in Washington in 1983; the Washingtonian of the Year Award from Washingtonian magazine and the Citizen of the Year Award from the local chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, both in 1976. In 1986 the Starr King School for the Ministry awarded him an honorary doctorate.

The twentieth anniversary of David Eaton's ministry at All Souls was observed in the fall of 1989 with a celebration at which William Schulz, president of the UUA, paid tribute to Eaton's ministry. "We are here this morning to honor a revolutionary," Schulz declared, "a man who has helped to bring a peaceful revolution to this church and to the Unitarian Universalist denomination."

Less than two years later Eaton became seriously ill with hepatitis B and was forced to limit his ministerial activities. On Easter Sunday, 1992, he preached his final sermon. "The Christ of Faith," he told an overflowing congregation, can be described in a single word, "Love," and that he had come to realize for the first time that love and ministry are the same thing. At the conclusion of the service Eaton was voted minister emeritus by the congregation.

Eaton died later that year. A memorial service was held at All Souls, with interment at Arlington National Cemetery. A scholarship fund was established in his name, preferably to be used to assist African American women preparing for the Unitarian Universalist ministry.

From the biography of David H. Eaton, written by Charles A. Howe in the *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, an on-line resource of the Unitarian Universalist History & Heritage Society.