

A Learned Man: Beyond the Four Walls of the Church

Bishop Dr. Claude Porter was told he would never lead a congregation

Tiffany Harrell – 13 November 2021

MAYWOOD, Ill-- As a young man growing up during racism and segregation, Claude Porter listened to Sam Cooke sing A Change is Gonna Come and knew that he would be a part of that change one day. No matter that the Jim Crow laws limited the rights of Blacks and the assassination of the Black leaders. He knew that God had a calling on his life.



Bishop Dr. Claude Porter sitting inside Proviso Missionary Baptist Church where he is the Founder and overseer located in Maywood, IL 1116 S. 5th Ave.

Now an 84-year-old CEO and Founder of Proviso Leyden Council for Community Action (PLCCA), Bishop Dr. Claude Porter has accomplished his mission, taking God outside the church's four walls and into the community. In the process, he has become the first African-American man to develop the Head Start program, which provides comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement

services to low-income families. Bishop Porter was inducted into the Hall of Fame of Health & Human Services for that program.

If you were to ask anyone in the Maywood community who is Bishop Porter, they'd tell you about the profound effect his works have had on their community. At the same time, Bishop is a man of few words.

He said that if he's being honest, he doesn't like to talk about himself. "I'm the type of person who let my works speak for itself. It helps me to remember who I've been and where I've come from and where I intend to go," Porter said.

When looking into who Porter was, you would find a man who came from humble beginnings. Claude Porter, the seventh child out of 12. The family lived on Virginia Street in Memphis, Tennessee, which led to a sewer at the base of the block, causing the homes to smell. The neighborhood was so poor that their home was referred to as a shotgun home because when the front door opened, you could see straight through to the back door. When Porter was only seven years old, he lost his father, James Porter, leaving his mother, Corean Porter, a single parent to raise him and his siblings. Claude's older brother Willie L Porter, who was in the ministry and became a well-known Bishop in Memphis at Greater Community Temple COGIC, became a father figure and encouraged him to trust God. Bishop Porter exercised his faith, and with two dollars in his pocket, a secondary education, a wife (Earnestine), and three kids (Debra Ann, Beverly, and Claudette), Bishop Porter left Memphis and moved to Chicago. He was following the footsteps of other African Americans in the 1960s to find better job opportunities. Bishop Porter started working at a moving company for his wife's uncle, driven an 18-wheeler at night to work in Wonder Bread's factory, never forgetting his call to ministry.

Bishop Porter joined Greater Progressive M.B. Church in Chicago under the late V.B. Watts, Sr. Pastor, who became his father figure and sent him to school. Bishop Porter was forced to move from Hyde Park in Chicago to Maywood when things were looking up for him. "When the urban renewal came through. I was staying in a traditional house; they

took the house, took the land, and put me out," Porter said. Finding himself on the streets, Pastor Watts paid for an apartment for Bishop and his family to live in.

This moment in life didn't discourage him, for he was a man of God who grew up in the Jim Crow south so, Bishop Porter understood the effects of racism and lack of opportunity to a community. He saw this in Maywood and wanted to build a better environment for Black people and would stop at nothing to accomplish that. He began his lengthy career at the forefront of advocacy for the Maywood community, from organizing youth programs, marching on Maywood State Bank to get the first Black teller hired, and purchasing that same bank in 1968, where he founded PLCCA to address the community's needs. PLCCA started with a grant of \$38,000 for employment and training. Shortly after, Bishop Porter became the Founder and Pastor of Proviso Missionary Baptist Church (PBC) in 1972, where he has served as the Pastor for 44 years and continues his mission as an advocate for change.

To this day, PLCCA has expanded its services to serve the low-income residents in Cook County's Proviso and Leyden Townships, the municipality of Norridge, and the Chicago metropolitan area. With over 30 social service programs, an operating budget of approximately \$8.7 million, and owning \$9.1 million in properties, Bishop Porter's agency continues to evolve, as the community needs change.

Claudette Harrell, Executive Vice President of PLCCA, said that Bishop's philosophy is embedded through the organization's mission. "Bishop Porter started PLCCA to give a hand up, not a handout," Harrell said. "When a person comes here in need, we'll assist that person by the time they walk into the door and meet whatever needs they have that we can participate. If we can't do it, we can refer it out to someone else."



Bishop Dr. Claude Porter, Governor J.B. Pritzker, dignitaries and community members in a private meeting at PLCCA discussing the needs of the community.

After all, these years later, Bishop Porter's found a way to be the arm of support that the communities needed. Bishop Porter remains faithful in his mission, whether it is having the ear of Governors, Mayors, and Presidents, from the pulpit to the streets. "My philosophy when I started, and it still is today, is that we must take God outside the four walls of the church and into the community."