

## PROFILE – Emanuel Cleaver

### **Narrator:**

This month on UMC.org Profiles, Emanuel Cleaver, U.S. Congressman and senior pastor of St. James United Methodist Church in Kansas City, shares his faith story.

Cleaver began his political career as a City Councilman in Kansas City, and went on to make history by becoming their first African American mayor. He has pastored Saint James United Methodist Church for over 30 years, starting out in a small condemned building with 47 members, and is now in a new 8-million dollar building with over 2,000 members. He is a strong civil rights activist, and has worked alongside greats such as Ralph Abernathy, the Rev. Joseph Lowery, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and C.K. Steele. For seven consecutive years, Cleaver was named one of *Ebony's* "100 Most Influential African Americans." He now splits his time between Kansas City and Washington, D.C., serving both God and country.

### **Emanuel Cleaver:**

I was born in a place called Waxahachie, Texas which is not very far from Dallas, Texas and my very early years were spent in a shack, a photograph of which I keep on the wall in my congressional office and I also kept it on the wall in my mayoral office in Kansas City. But I lived in this shack with my mother, father, and three sisters. It was a two room shack that was actually a place during the mid 1800's where slaves lived. And we lived in this place but we did not have the shack mentality in us, primarily because we knew nothing but church. That was our orientation from almost the moment we came as small children. We had to accompany our mother to choir rehearsal on Wednesday nights. On Sunday mornings we had to go to Sunday school, leave Sunday school for church, after church we had a very short break and then we were back Sunday night for the evening worship. My grandmother also attended that church. And on the other side of my family, the Cleaver side, my father's father, my grandfather, was Rev. Leroy Cleaver, Sr. And my father's oldest brother is Rev. Leroy Cleaver, Jr. His first cousin, my father's first cousin, is Rev. A. E. Cleaver of Fort Worth, Texas who pastors still. We had another cousin who pastored in St. Angelo, Texas and who was a United Methodist pastor. We have my great grandfather, the Rev. Noah Albert Cleaver, he had two brothers who were clergy members. And so with that kind of background it was unavoidable that I would grow up in church.

I was a football player and went off to college and kind of withdrew from church. I'm not sure that I can honestly say that I attended church a single Sunday during my college years. I'm not bragging, I'm confessing. But eventually after leaving Prairie View A&M University in Prairie

View, Texas for Kansas City, I began, for perhaps some unavoidable reasons, to reconnect with the church. One day it began to eat away at me. I was involved in the civil rights movement, I was around all the civil rights giants – Ralph Abernathy, who was my father in the ministry, as well as Rev. Joseph Lowery, a United Methodist pastor who was one of the founders with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Rev. Jesse Lewis Jackson, who also was in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth; C.K. Steele, and the list goes on. These are legendary men whose biographies can be read in history books. And they influenced me. And they really presented me a new picture of the Gospel, because while I love my uncles and grandfathers and cousins who were all preaching the Gospel, they practiced a ministry that was contained. And by that I mean they did fabulous jobs in pastoring their congregations, they devoted themselves almost absolutely, and they lived consecrated lives in the sense that that was all they thought about, studying the Bible and conveying their studies to the people who had come to them in search of a shepherd, an undershepherd. And so when I became involved in the civil rights movement around all of these giants, I saw a new kind of gospel – a gospel where those who were called had to do more than preach and pray. We had to go out and make changes in society. We had to go to the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and do more than pick up the wounded man and take him to a hospital, we had to have street lighting on the road to Jericho, we needed more police on the road to Jericho, we needed sidewalks. And so those pastors did a yeoman's job in changing my view of the ministry and of the church. And so having that strong injection of faith and works, I eventually walked into the bedroom one night and told my wife that I had received the call and I could not postpone it or deny it. I decided to leave my job at Penn Valley Community College where I was teaching to attend seminary. And she, as she has done throughout our marriage, was very receptive and supportive.

During my first year I was appointed to the Saint James United Methodist Church, in 1974. And I tease my former district superintendent by saying that I was appointed to that church, because it was essentially a mission church, to kill it. They didn't want to pay all of the money they had to pay to keep the doors open so they decided to send an inexperienced non-preaching seminarian to Saint James to kill it. However, the Lord had some other plans and lo and behold the church began to grow from its 47 members when I arrived to over a hundred, then we had to leave the building which had been condemned by the city's health department in Kansas City. We went to another building and a few years later we outgrew that building and moved to another building, and we outgrew it and three years ago we completed a new 8-million dollar sanctuary with some additional Sunday school classroom space, as well as space for a variety of ministries that we've all gotten started over the last couple of years.

I was asked by Ralph Abernathy to head the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Kansas City, and I became deeply involved in the civil rights movement in Kansas City, Missouri in the early and mid 1970's, and eventually I was elected to be the SCLC representative for the Midwest region, which gave me about eight states that I had to work on civil rights matters with those local leaders. And as I became better known in the community because of my civil rights work, I was asked if I would consider running for the city council. I thought about it for a while and agreed to run, and won. And I served three terms on the city council in Kansas City, and after the third term I made a decision to run for mayor. I did win, and after the first term I had a rather high approval rating and ran for reelection and served for four more years, and left the mayor's office completely satisfied with my contribution to the city and to the region. But four years later I was approached by the democratic leadership of the state and our city to run for congress. I was able to have my family support the decision, as well as the congregation of Saint James. I was very clear, if I could not stay, if I could not run for congress and continue to serve Saint James, then I would not run for congress. It was never, ever, ever one of those situations where I thought if I win I'll leave the church, no. I had to have the church involvement in my life.

It is critically important to me to get back to the church every week, for one selfish reason. I want to go back every week and connect with the people. I also need to have a tune up every week, a spiritual tune up. And so even though I deliver the sermons 95% of the time, I also have the opportunity to preach to myself. I also have the opportunity to be ministered to by the choir and the fellowship of the church also ministers to me. So it is an inextricable part of my someboidness to be in church as often as I can. There is no question that I could not do what I am doing now without having a deep and abiding faith in God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That is what I need in my life. I rely on that for strength, and particularly for energy during difficult times. I've got to have a relationship, an ongoing relationship with Christ. Without it I am lost, without it I am not able to do anything. With it, I am a strong member of congress and I am a pastor of a large congregation.

The church, in Kansas City and the Church universal, the Saint James United Methodist Church and The United Methodist Church serve as my spiritual parent or parents, because they are the teachers, they are the instructors. And even though I am the spiritual leader of Saint James, I can't tell you how much I learn by pastoring people. I just completed a 12-step Bible study program where I had about 150 people showing up every Monday night to learn about praying. And the 12 week period really just sent off a new level of prayer for me. And so while the people in Saint James would see me as their undershepherd, I see them also as providing me with the opportunity to move closer to the Lord, and to learn even more. Because in trying to teach them, I was required to go and delve both into the Bible and into many of the books that

have been written on prayer. And so I was enhanced as I sought to teach others. And the church serves a vital purpose for me in that it continues to instruct me. I learn more and more about the Lord, I learn more and more about His words and the 66 books of our canon, I learn more about me by trying to deal with the people who I have been called to minister to.

The United Methodist Church has been a great, great connection for me, because the United Methodist Church with its requirement for learning in terms of pastoring, and with the Episcopal leadership that I have served under has really, really made me I think a much better person. And the church of Jesus Christ to which I am connected, called the United Methodist Church, has been a major factor in my development, and I thank God for it.

**Narrator:**

Our thanks to Emanuel Cleaver for sharing his story with us.

This month's Profile was produced by Pam Price; editor was Lane Denson. I'm Hilly Hicks and Profiles is brought to you by UMC.org, the official online ministry of The United Methodist Church, a ministry of United Methodist Communications.