



# Bishop Douglas Miles, activist who advocated for Baltimore's impoverished residents and co-headed BUILD, dies

By JACQUES KELLY

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Bishop Douglas Miles, the former pastor of Koinonia Baptist Church who was respected for his leadership in the BUILD neighborhood empowerment movement, died Tuesday at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. He was 72.

His son, Harvey Miles, said his father died following surgery.

The Rev. Miles became one of Baltimore's best-known clergy activists, calling for financial equity in Baltimore's poorest neighborhoods while criticizing developers' showcase downtown projects, including the redevelopment of Port Covington.

"He not only believed in community empowerment, he lived it," said former Baltimore Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke.



The Rev. Douglas Miles, pictured in August 1999, was a co-chair of BUILD, Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development. (AMY DAVIS)

Born in Baltimore and raised in Lafayette Courts in East Baltimore, he was the son of Odessa Miles, a homemaker, and the Rev. Walter Harris, a pastor. He was a 1966 graduate of Paul Laurence Dunbar High School and a National Merit Scholarship finalist.

As a young Sunpapers newspaper carrier who was ignorant of racism, he was denied access to a White Tower hamburger shop bathroom because he was Black. He later said the experience proved beneficial to learning the realities of segregation in Baltimore.

He earned a bachelor's degree in humanistic studies at the Johns Hopkins University in 1970 and received his religious education at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park.

As an undergraduate, the Rev. Miles worked to improve the treatment of minority students and asked for more African American faculty hires. He also helped establish the Black Student Union at Hopkins' Homewood campus.

“On behalf of the entire Johns Hopkins community, I am profoundly saddened to learn of the passing of one of Baltimore's great leaders, Hopkins alumnus Bishop Douglas Miles,” Johns Hopkins President Ron Daniels said. “For nearly half a century, from his days as a founder as an undergraduate of the Johns Hopkins Black Student Union through his years of ministry and civic leadership with BUILD, Bishop Miles has never stopped blazing a path forward and changing the lives of people and institutions.



Matthew Celentano, left, and Bishop Douglas Miles attended the 27th Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Awards Dinner in January 2015 at La Fontaine Bleue in Glen Burnie. (Karen Jackson / Baltimore Sun)

“His life was truly dedicated to realizing the full promise of this city and to the idea that each of us had a role to play in achieving that goal. He has been a true friend to Baltimore, to all its citizens, and to his alma mater, Johns Hopkins. More personally, Bishop was my dear friend. I am so grateful to have witnessed his impact, his humanity, and his devotion to the city we all love.”

The Rev. Miles was among the first African Americans to assist at Baltimore’s St. Mark’s Evangelical Lutheran Church and later was in an early class of Black trainees with the old First National Bank.

He founded Koinonia Baptist Church in 1992. It was originally located on Greenmount Avenue and the congregation now worships on Belair Road in Northeast Baltimore.

In 1980, the Rev. Miles was a clergyman at Brown's Memorial Baptist Church in West Baltimore when he was asked to join the Industrial Areas Foundation, a network of faith and community organizations that was exposing redlining at a financial institution.

The Rev. Miles went on to be a co-chair of BUILD, Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development.

“Doug was a well-known community activist and a spiritual leader in the religious community,” former Mayor Schmoke said. “I had the pleasure of working with him through BUILD. He always pushed to do the right thing and move in the right direction.”

The Rev. Miles later joined a protest at the old Provident Bank that led to changes in the financial institution's practices.



Manuel Rodriguez, left, Dr. Chester L. Wickwire, chaplain at the Johns Hopkins University, Douglas Miles and Bill Younkin discuss religion in April 1968. (KLENDER / Check with Baltimore Sun Photo)

He and his group pushed for the creation of the College Bound Foundation, which assists Baltimore City public school students for college and provides financial aid.

In 2012, he spoke out for increased public schools funding. “Today was a challenge to all of Baltimore, the political establishments, the City Council, the business community, for us all to coalesce around the issue of new school construction and the need to raise the \$2.8 billion that it will take,” he said in *The Sun*.

He also worked on housing for low- and moderate-income families. In 2005, he noted that in the past 14 years, that BUILD, with Enterprise Homes, Baltimore City and the state, had built 767 affordable owner-occupied so-called Nehemiah homes throughout the city.

“They not only create equity for hundreds of working families, decrease blight and significantly reduce crime, but generate \$1.7 million in taxes,” he told The Sun in 2005.

He and other BUILD members pushed for the residential rebuilding of the Oliver neighborhood in East Baltimore after a drug dealer firebombed the Dawson family home in 2002 and caused the deaths of five children and their mother and father.



From left to right, Bishop Douglas Miles, the Rev. Glenna Huber, and Pastor Calvin Keene discuss their opposition to the Port Covington project in 2016. (Caitlin Faw / Baltimore Sun)

In 2005, when he and others felt their campaign to help Oliver was being ignored by city officials, 15 religious leaders marched into a city meeting and accused then-City Council President Sheila Dixon of not fulfilling her campaign promise to support redevelopment efforts in Oliver, where the Dawsons lived.

“Members of the faith-based nonprofit organization known as BUILD strode to the podium at the start of yesterday morning’s Board of Estimates meeting, temporarily taking the session over,” The Sun reported.

The article quoted the Rev. Miles saying Dixon has “sidestepped and backstepped on her commitment.”

BUILD and the Rev. Miles remained aggressive champions of Oliver and nearby Johnston Square and oversaw the reconstruction and rebuilding of numerous blocks.

Recalled as a behind-the-scenes networker and consensus builder, the Rev. Miles also formed a friendship with former Rouse Co. president Anthony “Tony” Deering, who led a \$10 million private investment in the reconstruction of Oliver.

“I started preaching when I was 18, and I would take nothing for the journey,” he said in a Johns Hopkins alumni publication interview. “My only desire is that I could be 20 years younger because I think it’s a great time to be in ministry because of the possibilities for change that exist for those who are committed.”





Bishop Douglas Miles speaks at City Garage in Port Covington in September 2016. He founded Koinonia Baptist Church in 1992. (Caitlin Faw / Baltimore Sun)

The award said, “When Kevin Plank’s Sagamore Development asked for the city’s largest-ever tax increment financing deal to facilitate the massive redevelopment of Port Covington, activists across the city decried the proposal as precisely the kind of corporate welfare Baltimore has engaged in for generations — a boon to the wealthy and the waterfront but no help to those struggling uptown.

“Bishop Douglas Miles of Koinonia Baptist Church — didn’t just decry the deal; [he and others] demanded a better one.”

Arnie Graf, a friend for 41 years who was BUILD’s lead organizer, said: “One of Doug Miles’ beauties that he pastored to everyone in the city. He was close to the president of Johns Hopkins and the people in public housing. And he mentored so many others.”

Funeral plans are incomplete.

Survivors include his wife of many years, Rosanna Miles; his two sons, Harvey Miles and the Rev. Dante K. Miles, both of Baltimore; a sister, Adelsia "Pat" Brown of Baltimore; five grandchildren; and a great-grandson.