



Rev. Vara Merle Smith Burns

July 28, 1951 - March 14, 2016

“But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles; They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.” Isaiah 41:31

A Phenomenal Woman

Rev. Vara Merle Smith Burns was born in Union, South Carolina on July 28, 1951. She was raised by her mother, Ms. Earline Thompson, her grandparents, aunts, and uncles. They all referred to her as Merle. It was her mother who single handedly raised her and four other siblings that encouraged her to work hard and believe success would come her way. Even though she was a sickly as a child, Rev. Vara graduated from high school and graduated with honors from Johnson C. Smith University with a degree in biology. She would later earn a Master’s degree in nutrition from Winthrop University. She was employed as one of the first black faculty members at the Medical University of South Carolina teaching physicians about nutrition. It was in Charleston that she met and married Rev. Harry Burns. After five years at MUSC, she coordinated a research project studying the development of esophageal cancer in black men at large hospitals in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Following that research project, Rev. Vara was Director of the WIC program helping thousands of families at the Franklin C. Fetter Clinic for five years. It was there that she decided to accept an administrative internship

from the National Institute of Health to learn how to run community health centers. She completed the program and the graduation was held at John Hopkins Hospital. She was offered jobs in New York, Utah, and California. Rev. Vara was not finished with doing medical research. She joined a team of doctors and other medical professionals on a fact finding mission to China and Hong Kong for one month. It was there that they made recommendations to improve health care in that foreign country.

In 1991, Rev. Vara returned for a brief period to teach at her old alma mater, Johnson C. Smith University. She would later enroll in a PHD program studying nutrition and epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh. During her studies, she was afforded an opportunity to do medical research on infant mortality at Elizabeth Hospital in Barbados for two full summers. However, upon her last visit, it was determined that she had developed mini strokes that would lead to her withdrawal from her academic studies. She only lacked a few more courses before finishing her PHD. Her husband felt the need to return to the Carolinas so that they would have family support. The Burns family never gave up on their desire to do medical missionary work overseas.

The Burns got ordained in the AME Church in 1986. In their early years in ministry, they sent thousands of dollars to help build churches and schools in South Africa. After returning from Pittsburgh, they built a water well in Nigeria providing fresh water to thousands. There has been a cry from the villages to build yet another well and start a health clinic. Rev. Vara was diagnosed with M.S. and chronic dementia in 2007. Even though she has pastored her own churches, State College AME Church in State College, Pennsylvania and Nesmith AME Church in Pittsburgh, she realized it was best to join her husband in his pastorate due to her failing health. This phenomenal woman has been a college professor, faculty member at a major medical center, author, done research around the world and provided pastoral care to thousands that have crossed her path.

Rev. Vara loves her family. She has three sisters, Marion, Laverne, Vivian, and one brother, Bennie. The Burns have three grown children, Kathryn, Ashanti, and Emmanuel. They have eight grandchildren and three great grandchildren. Rev. Vara came to church every Sunday to get her shout on even in the midst of her pain and suffering. She loved the Lord and her family have poured out their hearts to the members of Orangehill AME Church. On this day that the Lord has made, Rev. Vara and Rev. Burns wish to thank the members of Orangehill, their family, and friends for taking the time out to remember a phenomenal woman.

Previous Events

Family Visitation

MAR 19. 9:00 AM - 10:00 AM (ET)

Orangehill AME Church
3035 South Kings Hwy.
Wedgefield, SC 29168

Homegoing Celebration

MAR 19. 10:00 AM - 11:30 AM (ET)

Orangehill AME Church
3035 South Kings Hwy.
Wedgefield, SC 29168

Tribute Wall



“ *Rev. Vara Merle Smith Burns*

October 04, 2023 at 11:33 AM



“ *What a lovely and Godly woman. I had the opportunity to work with her at Franklin C Fetter health Clinic in 1988 and part of 1990 in the WIC program in the Nutrition Department . She was truly a blessing . She will be greatly missed.*

Vanessa Johnson Dukes, M.Ed, RD,LD

Vanessa J Dukes - April 13, 2020 at 04:56 PM



God placed her on this earth for only a short while, he placed her on earth to watch over little children who had no one else. As her body grew weary, God said well done my child, come home and rest in my arms. Yes Vanessa Dukes she will be missed
GG

gg - January 27, 2021 at 10:26 PM



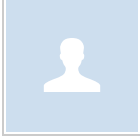
“ *Our heartfelt sympathy goes out to Harry, Kathryn, Ashanti and Emmanuel and family in the loss of a beautiful, amazing Godly woman. We first met Harry and Vara in July of 1988. We fell in love with them and their children. We hosted a barbecue for the wonderful singers from the Citadel at our home in Heritage USA at the request of Harry. We were thrilled to do it and they sang, "Mary Don't You Weep" before they left. Our thoughts and prayers are with all of you. With much love....Joe and Ann Ippolito*

Joe and Ann Ippolito - June 28, 2016 at 08:53 AM



Hey How Are You?? And Thank you

Emmanuel Burns - January 30, 2018 at 03:21 AM



“ *Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Rev. Vara Merle Smith Burns.*



March 18, 2016 at 02:54 PM



“ *I am so deeply sorry for your loss . May our loving Creator give you strength and comfort as you mourn the loss of your loved one . 2 Corinthians 1 : 3,4 .*

Deborah Henson - March 18, 2016 at 05:56 AM



“ *To Rev. Harry Burns and family. I have known you and Vera for along time and I know how dedicated both you are to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And it showed through your work and sacrifice here and in other countries around the world. She will be missed.*



Isiah Dupree - March 17, 2016 at 08:18 PM

DP

“ *Doretha, Ruby, James, Alice, Delores, and Peggy purchased the Peaceful White Lilies Basket for the family of Rev. Vara Merle Smith Burns.*



Doretha, Ruby, James, Alice, Delores, and Peggy - March 17, 2016 at 05:02 PM



“ *Lavender Reflections Spray was purchased for the family of Rev. Vara Merle Smith Burns.*



March 17, 2016 at 04:05 PM



“ *Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Rev. Vara Merle Smith Burns.*



March 17, 2016 at 08:02 AM

V-

“ *She will truly be missed. She was a true woman of God, but a true inspiration to all of those she touched. I love you cousin*

Valerie Smith -Brown - March 17, 2016 at 07:20 AM

AF

“ Aunt Peggy & Family purchased the Lavender Reflections Spray for the family of Rev. Vara Merle Smith Burns.



Aunt Peggy & Family - March 17, 2016 at 01:35 AM

SC

“ Deepest Sympathy to family and friends of vara. I have known Earline and her lovely family since a child. I pray we all be ready as vara lived her life and dedicated to her savior. May you rest in heaven. Everyone who loved and was related to Vara's Husband and entire family and friends, are in my prayers.



Sheila Henderson -Carter Rn and Family

Sheila Carter - March 16, 2016 at 11:15 PM

JM

“ My condolences to you and the family during this time. May God continue to bless and strengthen everyone during this time of loss and celebration of Rev. Vara life. I love you all.

*Sincerely,
Joycelyn McCants*

Joycelyn McCants - March 16, 2016 at 04:21 PM

MC

Condolences to the Rev. Harry Burns Family on the passing of Rev. Vara Burns. Sincerely, Mrs. Shirley W. Clinton and family. All is well.

Mrs. S. W. Clinton - March 18, 2016 at 08:32 AM

SN

“ *The world will truly miss Merle. She was a strong, Black woman with a beautiful spirit. She left such an impression on me as a child, when she told me, "Girls can be anything they want to be, just follow your heart." I love her for that. She motivated me to find my dream. Be strong family, God is watching over her and us.*

Love you all,

Shawnie

Shawna Nesbitt - March 15, 2016 at 09:24 PM



Geraldine
Smith

“ *Love you dear cousin RWG.*

Geraldine Smith - March 15, 2016 at 04:46 PM