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Revered minister, mentor dies at 98

A role model to many, the Rev. Fred Maxwell is hailed as a tireless source of inspiration.

December 14, 2005 | By Jeff Kuerth, Sentinel Staff Writer

The Rev. Fred Maxwell, a man considered the father of Central Florida's black preachers, died Tuesday. He was 98.

Maxwell, who served as pastor of St. John Mission- ary Baptist Church for 37 years, was a civil-rights leader, ardent advocate for the homeless, human history book and a man so universally respected that he often was called in to mediate church disputes.

FOR THE RECORD - ***** CORRECTION OR CLARIFICATION PUBLISHED JANUARY 5, 2006 *****

An item on the Dec. 14 front page about the death of the Rev. Fred Maxwell of Orlando may have left unclear how long he served at St. John Missionary Baptist Church. Though he retired in May 2001 after 36 years at the church, he stayed on for a 37th year, until early 2002, when his successor started. *****

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"This was a man anyone would want to know -- similar to Rosa Parks to me. The Reverend Maxwell had that kind of presence," Orlando City Commissioner Daisy Lynum said. "You are talking about an icon."

To ministers such as the Rev. Randolph Bracy of New Covenant Baptist Church of Orlando, Maxwell was a mentor who encouraged them, and helped resolve the problems that arise with pastoring.

"He knew how to bring calm to a very raucous situation. He had a special gift that way," Bracy said. "I have lost a dear friend. I have lost a mentor."

Orange County Commissioner Homer Hartage remembers Maxwell as a tireless advocate for the homeless.

Maxwell was instrumental in securing a \$4.8 million federal grant to convert a former motel on Colonial Drive and John Young Parkway into a 127-unit rental complex for the homeless that became known as Maxwell Terrace.

But he didn't stop there. When Maxwell came to Hartage seeking support for another motel conversion on South Orange Blossom Trail, Hartage turned him down -- four times. Maxwell kept coming back until Hartage finally relented.

Two years later, Hartage had a cousin who got out of prison and needed a place to transition back into society. He found an apartment at Maxwell Gardens on South Orange Blossom Trail.

"He ended up living in the same place I had problems approving," Hartage said.

Maxwell, who used a wheelchair, was still active and alert, working on a land deal in Maitland just a few months ago, Hartage said.

"He was still strong, and he was still able," Hartage said. "You really, in your heart, wanted to see him around forever. You just expect him to be there."

Eatonville Mayor Anthony Grant called for a moment of silence at a Town Council meeting Tuesday night to honor Maxwell.

"He stood up for everything that was right. We have lost a good leader," said Ella Dinkins, 87, a volunteer

at the Zora Neale Hurston Museum.

Born in Williston on Aug. 2, 1907, Maxwell grew up in Lake County as the son of turpentine-industry workers.

He said he first heard the calling to the ministry when he was 19 but rejected it. He worked as a carpenter, grew citrus and started a janitorial business.

Decades later, when he finally answered the calling, he was the father of six children.

Maxwell preached throughout Central Florida. He became minister of Orlando's St. John Missionary Baptist in 1964 and remained there until 2001.

A man who left school in the third grade, Maxwell obtained his high-school diploma later in life and would become known for his intellect and eloquence. That was his entry into the worlds of the humble and the mighty.

"He was not pretentious, even though he was very intelligent, very capable," Lynum said.

"He is going to be remembered as an advocate, but not just for the homeless. He worked in the community unselfishly."

Maxwell's life spanned the Ocoee race riot of 1920 to the civil-rights struggles of the 1960s to the election of blacks to public office.

And he remembered it all until the end.

"He was just a rich repository of African-American history in Central Florida," Bracy said. "He was a living legacy."

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