

2009 SESSION

ENROLLED

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 493

Celebrating the life of Levi E. Willis, Sr.

Agreed to by the Senate, February 25, 2009
Agreed to by the House of Delegates, February 27, 2009

WHEREAS, Levi E. Willis, Sr., of Norfolk, a beloved and respected minister, community leader, and entrepreneur, died on February 20, 2009; and

WHEREAS, Levi Willis was born on March 1, 1929, in North Carolina to sharecropper parents, and he moved with his family to Norfolk when he was 16 years old; and

WHEREAS, compelled to help others and to serve the church, Levi Willis left school in the 11th grade, was ordained as a minister in 1954, and began to preach to a small loyal following in a one-room church; and

WHEREAS, Pastor Willis founded the Garden of Prayer, which has grown and evolved over the years into a large and vibrant Church of God in Christ (COGIC) now located on Church Street in Norfolk; and

WHEREAS, his reputation as an inspirational religious leader grew, and in 1970 Pastor Willis became the youngest chairman ever elected to the Virginia Third COGIC National Council of Bishops; in 1982 he became national chairman of the denomination's general assembly; and

WHEREAS, Bishop Willis became an emeritus member of the COGIC leadership board that oversees the denomination of more than six million members; and

WHEREAS, an astute businessman and investor, Willis began buying homes in the 1950s, owning and renting out as many as 100 at a time and eventually selling most of them, and over the years he also acquired ownership interest in motels, a funeral home, and a local newspaper; and

WHEREAS, in the early 1970s, Levi Willis became the board chairman of Atlantic National Bank, the area's first bank with a multiracial ownership; and

WHEREAS, in 1974, Bishop Willis became the first black radio station operator in Hampton Roads and host of the call-in show "Crusade for Christ Hotline"; he acquired WOWI-FM and WPCE-AM in Norfolk and other stations and eventually owned more radio stations than any minority businessman in the country; and

WHEREAS, always aware of the best interests of the residents of Norfolk, Levi Willis was knowledgeable regarding public affairs and politics and served as a vice-chairman of the Virginia Democratic Party; and

WHEREAS, Bishop Willis was a charismatic and influential political leader and a valued mentor in the African American community, and he touched the lives of countless individuals in Hampton Roads and in Virginia; and

WHEREAS, Bishop Willis will be fondly remembered and greatly missed by his loving wife of over 60 years, Hortense Willis; his son and three daughters; and his numerous other family members, friends, and admirers in the Commonwealth; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the General Assembly mourn the passing of a fine community leader and outstanding Virginian, Levi E. Willis, Sr.; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate prepare a copy of this resolution for presentation to the family of Levi E. Willis, Sr., as an expression of the General Assembly's respect for his memory.

ENROLLED

SI493ER