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SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 493

Offered February 23, 2009

Celebrating the life of Levi E. Willis, Sr.

Patrons—Lucas and Miller, Y.B.

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 July 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.

INTRODUCED

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