

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Transition and Homegoing Services Of Rev. Norma Jean Pender, Affectionately Known As Reverend Mother

Detroit, MI – March 10, 2025 – With heavy hearts and deep sorrow, we announce the passing of a gospel legend, a trailblazer in Christian broadcasting, and a pillar of the gospel music community, Rev. Norma Jean “Reverend Mother” Pender. On March 10, 2025, the Lord called her home to eternal rest.

Born on April 30, 1938, in Pittsburgh, PA, Rev. Pender’s lifelong passion for gospel music and ministry took her across the country before she made Detroit her home in the late 1950s. It was here that she formed a lasting friendship with Rev. James Cleveland. While working for Stinson’s Funeral Home, she stood beside Rev. Cleveland as he founded the Gospel Music Workshop of America (GMWA) in 1968. She stepped into the newly created position as Director of Public Relations, and played a crucial role in promoting gospel music, ensuring its reach extended far and wide. Her GMWA legacy includes establishing the beloved annual "Come As You Are Musical" at the GMWA convention, a cherished tradition that touched countless lives.

Her Ministry and Legacy

Through the years Rev. Pender has been affiliated with many churches including, New Light Baptist Church, Central C.M.E., Greater Grace Temple, and New Jerusalem Temple Baptist Church. Rev. Pender was licensed to preach the Gospel in the Christian Episcopal Church in 1974 and ordained in 1978 by the late Bishop E. P. Merchison. In 1982 she accepted the role of Assistant Pastor of New Jerusalem Temple Baptist Church, pastored by Rev. Lawrence J. London and was ordained in the Baptist faith in 1985 through the National Baptist Convention, USA. A woman of faith, strength, and resilience, Rev. Pender dedicated her life to spreading the gospel through both the pulpit and the airwaves.

Since 1997, until her stroke in 2016, Rev. Pender was the host of the widely popular gospel radio show “In the Spirit with Reverend Mother” on WMUZ AM 1340, a staple for Detroit’s gospel community. Her daily show, her work in the church community and her powerful presence and deep love for gospel music made her voice a beacon of inspiration for listeners across the region. Though her official on-air tenure ended after her stroke, she remained an influential force in gospel music and continued serving as WCHB’s ambassador to the gospel music community.

Her early love for gospel music started as a child in Pittsburgh, PA, where she aspired to be a singer or choir director. While she learned to play the piano, she discovered she did not have the vocal abilities she had hoped for, her undeniable passion for the ministry of music led her to become a choir director at the age of 14. She never hesitated to share her joy for gospel music, and it was this enthusiasm that Rev. James Cleveland recognized when he entrusted her with promoting the first GMWA convention in 1968—a responsibility she would faithfully uphold for decades.

Rev. Pender's voice, presence, and influence in gospel music, media, and ministry will be profoundly missed, but her legacy will live on in the hearts of those she touched.

Memorial Services

The Detroit community, along with family, friends, and loved ones, will gather to honor the life and legacy of Rev. Norma Jean "Reverend Mother" Pender through the following services:

Public Viewing:

- Wednesday, March 26, 2025
- Location: New Jerusalem Temple Missionary Baptist Church
17330 Fenkell Ave, Detroit, MI 48227
Bishop Lawrence J. London, Pastor

Musical Celebration:

- Thursday, March 27, 2025, 7pm
- Location: Greater Burnette Baptist Church
16801 Schoolcraft Rd, Detroit, MI 48227
Rev. R. Patrick Johnson, Pastor

Homegoing Celebration:

- Friday, March 28, 2025 - 10am Family Hour
11am Homegoing Service
- Location: Greater Grace Temple
23500 7 Mile Road, Detroit, MI 48219
Bishop Charles H. Ellis, III, Pastor

A Lasting Impact

Rev. Pender's contributions to gospel music, ministry, and media cannot be overstated. Whether behind the mic, in front of the congregation, or working tirelessly behind the scenes, she remained a steadfast advocate for gospel music and faith-based broadcasting.

As we celebrate her extraordinary life, we extend our deepest condolences to her family, her New Jerusalem Temple Baptist church family, GMWA (Detroit) family, her adopted family, colleagues in gospel music and ministry, and the countless people whose lives she touched.

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