

UCC ROOTS

Remembering our History

February 2021

“Committed to Church and Education”

Charles Shelby Rooks (1924-2001) was a well-known African American United Church of Christ leader. When he died people celebrated his life in the Amistad Chapel at the UCC “Church House” in Cleveland. As far back as 1879 the Rooks’ family had been involved with Congregational churches in North Carolina. Rooks graduated from Virginia State University and Union Theological Seminary in New York. In 1953 he was ordained and became the pastor of a small church in Orangeburg, NY.

Rooks became a well-known leader in high profile positions committed to church and education. From 1967 to 1974 he led the Fund for Theological Education in Princeton, NJ. In 1974 he became president of Chicago Theological Seminary, becoming the first Black president in theological education leading a predominantly White seminary. Finally, in 1984 Rooks became executive vice president of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, retiring in 1992.

Rooks cared deeply about churches and people. He was on the staff of First Congregational UCC in Washington, DC—a White church that played a key role in founding Howard University after the Civil War. In DC he also served as a pastor at Lincoln Memorial Temple UCC. Rooks was always identifying, encouraging, and assisting African Americans to join the UCC and enrich their ministries.

One story from James Forbes illustrates how Rooks changed lives. Forbes, who later became an important preacher and progressive Christian leader, grew up in a strong Pentecostal family that frowned on seminary education. Forbes, however, did not want to give up his seminary dream.

Fortunately, Forbes was introduced to Rooks, who helped Forbes enroll and finish seminary. People said that Forbes was poor. He agreed, saying “. . .poor people usually have a little something. But I did not have anything until I was introduced to Charles Shelby Rooks.”



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