

OBITUARIES

Charles Learning
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Founder of 12 churches in Iowa dies at age 84

By WILLIAM SIMBRO

Register Religion Writer

The Rev. Charles Learning has sung his last rich tenor rendition of "I'm Going Higher Some Day" — the hymn that was his trademark through a 61-year ministry that began in Iowa, the state he left 41 years ago but always called home.

The Rev. Mr. Learning — founder of a dozen Pentecostal churches around Iowa, one of the founders of the Open Bible Standard Churches, and a pioneer broadcaster with a continuous radio ministry since 1929 — died of a heart attack Tuesday in St. Petersburg, Fla. He was 84.

Services will be at 2 p.m. Friday at Faith Temple in St. Petersburg, where he had been pastor since leaving Iowa in 1947. A Des Moines service will be at 2 p.m. Tuesday at First Church of the Open Bible, 2200 Beaver Ave.

He was a native of Perry. Learning ancestors who came from Indiana reportedly were among the first six white families to settle in Dallas County. One of Learning's favorite yarns was about his great uncle Elisha Learning, who traded, even up, a piece of land he owned for a team of oxen. The State Capitol now sits on that land.

He was ordained a Church of the Foursquare Gospel minister by Aimee Semple McPherson, flamboyant founder of that Pentecostal movement, in a 1927 service at the old Coliseum in Des Moines. Five years later, he was among 32 Foursquare pastors who met in Des Moines to start the Open Bible movement. From 1928 to 1933 he started 12 churches in Iowa and one in California, while a Bible school student in Los Angeles.

He went on the radio in Cedar Rapids with an evangelistic team in 1929 and had radio programs ever since. In 1944 he was one of the founders of National Religious Broadcasters. He was a longtime officer of that organization as well as of the National Association of Evangelicals. He was active in starting mission stations on Caribbean islands.

As well as his St. Petersburg church and weekly "Faith Gospel Broadcast," Learning started St. Petersburg Bible Institute in 1947, moved it to a 30-acre campus at nearby Largo in 1963 and changed the name to Florida Beacon College. As a gesture toward slowing down, he resigned as president in 1979 and was named the school's chancellor.

He returned to Iowa frequently for preaching missions and national Open Bible conventions. Honored by his denomination at the 1979 convention, he declared: "I don't believe in retirement. I just say, 'Lord, give me a new set of tires.'" In an interview, he declined to give his age — he was then 75 — "If I told my age, people would think I should be sitting around waiting for the undertaker. I'm waiting for the upper-taker."

"He was a patriarch in Open Bible and a spiritual father to me," said the Rev. Ray Smith, general superintendent of the denomination, who said he came into the church through Learning's ministry in Waterloo. "He had a flame and fervor that was unprecedented. He never lost his fervor for the ministry and for souls."

Survivors include his wife Pearl, a son by a previous marriage, Mack Gable of Waterloo, and three daughters, Ardyce Smith of Cape Canaveral, Fla.; Barbara Reynolds of St. Petersburg; and Marsha Obenshain of Roanoke, Va. Among his surviving eight grandchildren is Dan Gable, wrestling coach at the University of Iowa.

Learning He is one of the many who have helped to build a church.