The late Bishop Barbara Lewis King stood tall in New Thought—and lifted her congregants to new heights.

Photos by Asa Williams
I won’t forget you.” That’s what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said when he met the unforgettable young woman who would become one of the world’s most inspirational spiritual leaders. Barbara Lewis King marched beside the iconic civil rights leader during the Chicago Freedom Movement for fair housing in 1966. The shoes she wore that day now sit in the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta.

Thousands of others have felt the same way about Bishop Barbara Lewis King, D.Min., since she made her transition on October 11, 2020. The first New Thought minister to be consecrated as a bishop was—and still is—simply unforgettable.

King earned a Doctor of Ministry degree (achieved at age 81) and a master’s degree in social work, and the list of her awards and honorary doctorates is quite long. In 2001, she was named the first female chief of the Ashanti tribe in Ghana. She was known there as Nana Yaa Twumwaah, which translates to “Queen Mother,” but most people the world over simply called her Dr. Barbara. This remarkably dynamic woman was known for her magnetizing air and an inner light that beamed out and touched others’ souls. She made folks feel accepted and valued, and she reminded them of their divinity. People wanted to hear what she had to say because her message was so empowering.

King was known for teaching a number of truths central to New Thought, starting with the idea that God is within each of us, so we are perfect just as we are. She encouraged people to meditate for guidance and then to put their divinely inspired ideas out into the world. If someone holds back, she taught, everyone misses out.

King also emphasized the importance of affirmations, explaining that they are a means of convincing your subconscious mind of what your higher mind already knows. Once you do that, she noted, instead of reacting to a difficult circumstance, you can simply act from truth, pulling forth the good you seek. Her sermons were overflowing with these and other powerful, life-changing ideas.

Major luminaries and dignitaries across the world had taken notice of King’s singular presence. The Dalai Lama asked to meet her, then threw his arms around her when the moment came. Indian spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar invited her to speak at the World Culture Festival in 2016, where she sat beside the famed Hindu Gurudev in front of an international...
audience of 80,000. Buddhist Master Zhi Gang Sha says King was his mother in at least two past lives and treated her accordingly. King had worked with former First Lady Rosalynn Carter and President Clinton, and she considered the late poet Maya Angelou a close friend. Oprah Winfrey even once called King “the Queen of New Thought.” She lived a life most only dream about.

Not long after turning 90 last summer, she joked that she found herself “not so much retired as reassigned.” Just weeks before her transition, she was still giving weekly sermons via Facebook Live and had various projects and plans in the works.

Answering the Caul

King was born with a caul; she emerged shrouded in the amniotic sac or what her family called a “veil.” Such extremely rare births are thought to foretell a special child, one imbued with spiritual powers. “It was how I came forth,” she said, recalling a deeply spiritual childhood filled with metaphysical practice before she even knew the term. She was teaching Sunday school by age 13 and noted, "Church life was my whole life.”

Watching the minister at the front of her church, she could see herself there. But as a young girl she was told, “Oh, no, Barbara. Baptists don’t have women ministers.” But still she felt the call, a strong pull to speak, lead, and preach.

She was a straight-A student and a natural public speaker. Teachers wrote on her report cards that she talked too much. Even as a teenager, she was quite tall, eventually reaching six-foot-five. “My height speaks to my family tree,” she said, noting that her grandmother stood at seven feet. “We were all giants.” When her classmates teased her because of her height, a kind teacher comforted her and told her that her voice was powerful. King’s impressive stature seemed the perfect match for the conveyance of her preaching and ideas. She learned early on that “when you’re tall, they’ll hear what you have to say.”

Letting the Light Shine

In 1949 while in college, King caught tuberculosis. Because of segregation, she found herself in the infirmary for Black students, which she described as being like army barracks. There, she found herself preaching to fellow patients. She found various Unity pamphlets and issues of Daily Word that
had been left behind, and they taught her that God lived within her. When she spoke and ministered, people would listen. Truly listen.

After graduating with her master’s from Atlanta University, King enrolled in the University of Chicago. While she was going through a personal challenge, a fellow student offered, “You have to come and see my pastor, Johnnie.”

“I thought it was a man,” King said, “because I had never heard of a woman in ministry.” But her friend was speaking of Rev. Johnnie Colemon, who was originally a Unity minister before she left Unity to start her own church and to found the Universal Foundation for Better Living. Colemon was soon encouraging King to preach. “What’s stopping you?” Colemon asked after the two women spent time together. King realized she was the only force in her way. Colemon helped her heal her self-doubt. Soon, King found herself speaking at conferences and noticing her dream taking root. She had always wanted to found her own church—one that was inclusive, one that valued diversity, one where she would lead. She was following the call from within.

King learned to love and appreciate her own unique gifts and in turn shared that lesson with others. “I will pray my way through everything,” she once said. Of her nine books, two of the most popular—In Me, As Me: Ten Principles for Finding the Divine Within (self-published in 2015) and Transform Your Life (DeVorss, 1989)—provide lessons for healing emotional pain and allowing God’s love to flow.

Despite her successes, the intrepid leader had her share of difficulties: She was fired from her university job for preaching on the side. Yet even that was pushing her toward her destiny. What started as a 12-person prayer group in 1971 grew into the Hillside International Truth Center in Atlanta. At a conference in the early 1970s, King was approached by another female minister and given a prophecy: “I see you speaking in front of thousands of people and traveling across the world.”

She didn’t think much of it at the time, but she never forgot the woman’s words.

Serving Humanity

In 2011, King spoke before nearly 80,000 people in Berlin during the World Culture Festival. Wow, she thought, the prophecy is now being revealed, recalling the words she’d heard nearly 40 years earlier. Grace warmed her heart. Seated on the stage, she felt an outpouring of love and peace and felt the power of diverse cultures coming together to celebrate. She was in a place of honor in the Olympiastadion, the same venue where Jesse Owens won four gold medals in 1936 during the Nazi regime. During that time, Owens faced unconscionable racial discrimination abroad and at home. King felt hope being asked to speak before so many in the same space where such an incredible athlete set world records but was denied his rightful honor. There she was: both an African American and a woman, and people from across the world were gushing with acceptance. The experience solidified for her the idea that racial justice is something that must be felt in both the mind and the heart.

Another honor that stood out for her was having the chapel in the Atlanta International Airport named for her. “It was overwhelming,” she said of learning that the space would from then on be known as the Dr. Barbara Lewis King Interfaith Chapel. “It spoke to my soul.” The sanctuary that celebrates the diversity of religion and King’s inclusive message of empowerment and compassion sits on the third floor of the airport’s atrium, a hub of peace in the middle of one of the most bustling airports in the world.

Turning 90

Months after King turned 90 this past August, birthday cards were still pouring in from all over the world. People wrote to tell her how she had touched their lives. Some described going back to school late in life, as she did. For example, one card mentioned that the sender was inspired to get their doctorate at 75—the same age King was when she returned to finish her own.

King was a trailblazer across academia, New Thought, civil rights, and ministry—a leader known for her incredible inspirational service to humanity. If, as she taught, the real reason we’re here is to experience love, to give love, and to transform lives, then her nine decades were certainly a glorious testament to all three.

In 2009, Unity Worldwide Ministries honored Bishop Barbara Lewis King, D.Min., with the Light of God Expressing Award in Society. In 2018, she was an inaugural New Thought Walden Awards honoree. For more information on her work, visit drbarbaraking.com.