

THE MISSIONARY WORK OF VIOLA SUSANNAH HENRY

JUNE 18, 1922 – APRIL 16, 1999

Viola was born Viola Susannah Noel-Hutchinson to Leanora Noel and Peter Hutchinson on Union Island, St. Vincent, West Indies. Her mother died when Viola was only 10 years old, but her dying wish and desire for Viola was for her to become a teacher. At age 12, Viola went to live with the Ambrose family who introduced Viola to the Seventh-day Adventist message. She got baptized and happily embraced this message!

Viola was a very ambitious young woman and so she left Union Island at the age of 16 to visit an older brother who lived in Aruba, a Dutch island located in the southern part of the Caribbean, which is a few miles north of Venezuela and belongs to what is known as the Dutch Caribbean. There, she met Thomas Adolphus Henry-Phipps, who had just returned home after working on an assignment in Mexico for a few months, for the Shell Oil Company. On his way home, he said he wondered—in prayer fashion—when he would find a wife and have a family of his own. When he got home, he said he saw a beautiful girl in his house! Their marriage was arranged, and Viola married Thomas at age 16 on May 2, 1939!

They lived in Aruba and started a family there. Viola was very active in the church and was famous for reciting long poems! Both Viola and Thomas were very ambitious and adventurous people. In 1954 they left Aruba for the island of St. Christopher, better known to many as St. Kitts, with their seven children. After living there for only a short time, and after discussing a plan with Viola, Thomas decided to leave St. Christopher for England because he heard that there was work there, and he wanted something better for his children! So, he left for England in September of 1955, and Viola and their eight children—they had one more in St. Christopher—followed soon after, in early 1956.

Soon after arriving in England and settling in the city of Birmingham—the second largest city in England, set in what is known as the Midlands, which is also famous for the Cadbury Chocolate Factory and William Shakespeare, among other tourist attractions!—Viola joined the Handsworth Seventh-day Adventist church, which was located on Nineveh Road at the time. While Handsworth church was and still is the second largest Seventh-day Adventist church in Birmingham—Camphill Seventh-day Adventist church being the largest, formed over 60 years ago, and is also the oldest Seventh-day Adventist church in that city—it seemed a more vibrant, active church with more young people in attendance and also seemed to produce beautiful brides for many of the male members of the Camphill church to choose from!!!

Viola threw herself into church work. Her desire was to work fulltime for God. She held many church offices which included: Community Services Director, Stewardship Ministry Leader, Sabbath School Superintendent, Choir Director, Adult Sabbath School Teacher, Personal Ministries Leader, and Deaconess and became known as a *SUPER* soul-winner! In those days they didn't have female Elders; otherwise Viola may have been one too!

She won hundreds of people to God and helped to plant many churches, which included Northfields, Newtown and Smethwick churches. She also advised encouraged and comforted ministers and their wives.

In the surrounding communities Viola was known for her love, patience and kindness, Community Services work, godly advice, her Bible studies—and was viewed as a woman of God who *really* knew her Bible! She was also known for encouraging people to use herbs and natural remedies for healing common ailments, and would even give community demonstrations on how to use these natural methods. For some time Viola was also known as a member who raised the most funds in her area, for the Ingathering Campaign, an official yearly church fundraiser for ADRA—Adventist Development and Relief Agency, an international humanitarian agency in operation since November 1956.

The former place of worship for the Handsworth church on Nineveh Road became dilapidated and was no longer fit to worship in. Viola was a woman of action and so she went looking for a new location for the Handsworth church. She found a building on Hutton Road, and found ways for the conference to own it. She raised funds through her grand concerts and her husband Thomas—though not a Christian at the time—can remember going with her to pay for the building. The Handsworth church building on Hutton Road was bought on December 19, 1966 for £9,500. It was a former St. Mary's Mission Hall Handsworth, owned by the Birmingham Diocesan Trustees. The building was renovated and the Handsworth church members soon occupied it and had a wonderful dedication service to celebrate this occasion.

Handsworth and Camphill were the leading churches in the Conference in soul-winning during the late seventies and early eighties. Viola made an outstanding contribution to that reality through her Bible studies and soul-winning efforts. In the 1960s and 1970s she pioneered hosting grand musical concerts and raised hundreds of Sterling Pounds in funds for church building projects. Soon, whenever a group of Adventists wanted to plant a church they would call on Viola to plan one of her grand concerts to raise funds for their church ventures. She became well known for raising considerable amounts of money for buildings to be renovated and converted into places of worship.

Many churches became filled with new converts from Viola's soul winning efforts, but she still said, "I want to work for the Lord, *full time*," since at that time she worked full time at the John Lucas factory in Newtown, Birmingham. One minister remembers and comments on Viola's enthusiasm for soul-winning, *"I began to work in Handsworth [SDA church] about 1972. Before I began [as senior pastor] Viola was always busy giving Bible studies in the afternoons. [After] I arrived she continued her missionary work. Consequently, every baptism I had she had someone who was ready for baptism. Soon we were having baptisms every three months and the number of candidates grew. By this time I needed help more than what the Elders could give and she was the most qualified lay person. It was an accepted fact that whether she was employed by the conference or not, she was going to work for her Master! Employment [through the conference was only] recognition of her CALL to be a soul-winner. After each baptism she would visit those who had made decisions to follow Jesus. We had a Pastor's Bible*

Class in the Minister's Vestry which grew so large that it had to be transferred to the Choir Vestry!" We know that the number of souls that were won by Viola is recorded in heaven, and we will know the actual figure when we meet the "Rewarder" of our works that were accomplished in His Vineyard.

By the encouragement of the first Black office secretary to the Stewardship Departmental Director of the North British Conference—a young lady who Viola adopted—Viola applied for a Bible Instructor's Correspondent Course and completed it. She was then interviewed by Bryan Ball, the President of the North British Conference at the time. Her application was accepted and on October 1, 1973, she became the very first Black Bible Instructor to *ever* work for any conference in England! During her ministry she also accepted many preaching appointments from many churches across the North British Conference.

Some of Viola's favorite hobbies included: singing—from dawn to dusk—music, reading, writing, studying, poetry, fashion designing, tailoring and sewing—she often sewed clothes for her ten children—cooking and baking—she became internationally famous for her vegetarian cooking, and ministers from different parts of the world would encourage other visiting ministers to make sure they got invited home for Sabbath dinner by Sister Henry!—speaking, preaching, teaching and Bible research, crocheting and knitting. She also loved God's nature, enjoyed going on outings and meeting new people.

She memorized and recited super long poems in the grand concerts she would organize, and was invited to churches to speak and recite these long poems, because she had a knack for reciting them with humor and sprite! Two of her favorite poems were "The Devil Goes to Church," and "Monkey's Disgrace." She was beautiful—inside as well as out—vivacious, outgoing, energetic, a comedian, faithful church sister, dependable neighbor, wonderful mother and wife, a good listener and a loving friend. She adopted young people who had no parents or whose parents were not Christians, and her home was a refuge for the youth and the friendless.

Viola was a miracle woman to many people. Even though she had never studied Psychology, she was advisor and counselor to many. Even though she never saw the inside of a seminary, she was known as a great preacher. Even though she never received any conventional training as an evangelist, she won hundreds of souls to the Lord as long as she was able to work for Jesus. Even though she never went to school to learn music, she received and taught piano lessons and today there are people who are accomplished pianists who were once her students! She also directed choirs even though she was never taught how to direct. She sang, acted and was a playwright, even though she had a minimal formal education, but she also took college courses and owned the Bible Commentaries, Bibles for Bible research and owned and read the complete library of Ellen G. White, whom many also compared her to!

Viola could have become a Professor of English, but because she eventually had ten children, and suffered with multiple heart disease, God opened another way to grant the dying wish of her mother, for Viola to become a teacher. Viola became a Teacher of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ! With their children all educated and grown up, in 1987 Viola and Thomas decided to immigrate to West Palm Beach, Florida, America, because of Viola's health. In 1994 when she went to Loma Linda University Medical Center in Southern California, because of her advanced heart disease, the attending Cardiologist had to call the students to come and gaze upon a miracle woman! He stated that Viola's heart had made its own bypass *several* different times, and that by rights she should have been dead a long time ago! They treated her like a queen during her hospital stay. However, after diagnosing her with multiple heart disease and Alzheimer's they told her that there was nothing more that they could do for her. Even after that, Viola lived until Friday, April 16, 1999, when she quietly passed away in Jesus at the age of 76, in Colombia Hospital in West Palm Beach, Florida, surrounded by her husband of 60 years—who by that time had accepted Jesus because of Viola's spiritual influence and exemplary Christian lifestyle—and *most* of her ten children, who sang her favorite hymns in her last Sabbath evening worship on Earth, as she fell asleep in Jesus. She truly was a miracle woman, saved to serve by the Miracle Worker Himself, King Jesus.

