



## Dr. James Harris Jr.

May 31, 1947 - February 8, 2026

Dr. James Harris Jr. was born on May 31, 1947, in Moncks Corner, South Carolina. He was the oldest child of the late Rev. James Harris, Sr. and Emma Gadsden Harris. He married Gwendolyn, his wife of 50 years, in Detroit, Michigan in 1975.

Affectionately known by his family as “Junior,” James was reared in a nurturing home that focused on Christian values, education and music of all genres. Under the tutelage of his parents, James learned to sing and play the piano and many other instruments. At the age of 10, James was appointed choir director and pianist/organist at Grace Reformed Episcopal Church in Moncks Corner, S.C. At age 12, he had the honor of beginning six years of service as the organist and choir director of the congregations that his father pastored, Bethel and St. Luke’s RE Churches in Charleston S.C.

After high school, James earned his B.S. in Music Education and Performance from Virginia State University, followed by a master’s degree in Music Education and Performance and a Ph.D. in Education Leadership and Policy from the University of Michigan. He also completed postdoctoral certificate programs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

For more than 50 years, James devoted his life to shaping generations of

students, educators and musicians. He started his career as a successful public-school teacher, band director and administrator for over a decade in Detroit. He was well known for leading the highly regarded Cody High School Marching Band and the Department of Music at Cass Technical High School. He went on to travel and perform across the United States, Canada, Mexico, Japan, Spain and Italy, becoming nationally known for his extensive work in the areas of music, school leadership and research.

James' distinguished career in educational leadership, included serving as a high school principal (Joliet, IL), assistant superintendent (West Aurora, IL), superintendent (North Chicago, IL, Buffalo, NY; Inglewood, CA; Taylor, MI) and executive director (Grand Rapids, MI). He also returned to teach at his alma maters as a Department Chair and Professor of Doctoral Studies and Educational Leadership Department at Virginia State University and as an adjunct professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

Beyond his leadership endeavors, James had many creative pursuits including publishing books, composing hymns and orchestral music and recording musical tributes to the thousands of choir members, pastors and church members who sang songs of faith led by him for more than 50 years. He composed a host of compositions, including the "Detroit Folk Mass" and "Six Sacred Anthems for Choir." He also wrote books including, "Strategies for Involving Multicultural Parents in the Education of their Children" and "10 Essential Strategies for Improving Student Achievement."

James was currently the minister of music at Wesley United Methodist, in Colonial Heights, VA. During his career he also served as organist, pianist and/or choir director across the United States with the following churches and choirs:

Grace RE Church, Moncks Corner, SC

Bethel RE Church, Charleston, SC  
St. Luke's RE Church, Charleston, SC  
United States' Army Choir/Civilian Organist at Fort Lee, Petersburg, VA  
Virginia State University Choir (Accompanist, 2013-2018), Petersburg, VA  
Hope Lutheran Church (LCA), Detroit, MI  
Lutheran Church in American Lay Associate for Music (25 years)  
Detroit Coalition Mass Choir (conductor)  
Revelation Lutheran Church (ELCA), Detroit, MI  
Immanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Detroit, MI  
St. Luke's Lutheran Church-Organist (ELCA), Grand Rapids, MI  
Wesley United Methodist, Colonial Heights, VA

James departed this life on Sunday, Feb. 8, 2026, in Chester, VA. His legacy will live on in the countless voices he trained, the confidence he nurtured and the enduring love of music and community he instilled in all who had the privilege to work with him. He is survived by his wife, Gwendolyn; three children, Leah Harris Seupersad (Suwanee, GA), David James Harris (Detroit, Michigan), and Felisa Grant McDavid (Charleston, S.C.); brother, Henry T. Harris (Helen); grandchildren, Brielle and Beania Seupersad; uncles, Isaac and Henry Gadsden; and a host of nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends. He was preceded in death by his grandson, Treyvind Jackson McDavid.

Thursday, February 19, 2026

Visitation

10:00 AM

Memorial Service

11:00 AM

Wesley United Methodist Church

3701 Conduit Road, Colonial Heights, VA 23834.

Funeral services in Virginia are being handled by the Colonial Heights Chapel of E. Alvin Small Funeral Homes and Crematory - 2033 Boulevard, Colonial Heights, Virginia 23834.

Graveside Service

Wednesday, February 25, 2026

12:00 noon

Blanding Cemetery

1848 Hwy. 45

Pineville, South Carolina 29468

The Graveside Service will be LIVE-STREAMED via the Smith-McNeal Funeral Home FACEBOOK PAGE!

# Cemetery Details

## Blanding Cemetery

Pineville, SC

# Previous Events

## Memorial Service

FEB **19**. 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM (ET)

Wesley United Methodist Church  
3701 Conduit Road  
Colonial Heights, VA 23834

## Graveside Service

FEB **25**. 12:00 PM - 1:00 PM (ET)

Blanding Cemetery  
1848 Hwy. 45  
Pineville, SC 29468

# Tribute Wall



“ *W.M. Smith-McNeal Funeral Home created a Webcast in memory of Dr. James Harris Jr.*



---

**W M Smith-McNeal Funeral Home & Chapel** - February 25 at 03:06 PM

VM

“ *Van, Pam, Matt, Allison, and Ben Momon purchased the Peaceful White Lilies Basket for the family of Dr. James Harris Jr..*



---

**Van, Pam, Matt, Allison, and Ben Momon** - February 22 at 08:18 PM

SM

“ *Shirley, Joseph,Allen and Michael purchased the Peaceful White Lilies Basket for the family of Dr. James Harris Jr..*



---

**Shirley, Joseph,Allen and Michael** - February 21 at 02:42 PM

LH

“ We extend our deepest and most heartfelt condolences to Felisa McDavid and the entire Harris family during this time of loss.

*Mr. James Harris was a beloved father, and we know his presence will be greatly missed. Please know that you are not alone—our family is lifting you all in prayer, asking God to grant you strength, comfort, and peace in the days ahead.*

*May the love you shared and the memories you hold bring you comfort, and may God’s grace surround you now and always.*

*With love and sympathy,  
The Holmes-Mack Family*

---

**Lisa Holmes-Langford** - February 20 at 08:41 AM



“ A [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) was planted in honor of Dr. James Harris Jr..

---

February 19 at 11:50 PM



“ Emerald Garden Basket was purchased for the family of Dr. James Harris Jr..



---

February 19 at 11:50 PM

MW

“ To Henry "Hank" Harris...

*My heartfelt condolences to you and your family. I didn't have the privilege of knowing your brother, however, I know enough of him from my parents (life-long Reformed Episcopalians) who spoke loving pride of you and your brother. Before my time living in this area, your father pastored at my home church, Mt. Olivet RE Church; therefore, I feel connected to all of you - I've been in the presence of your gracious mother, Mrs. Emma Harris and of course I know you and your lovely wife Helen through family and the village in Augusta, GA. I pray for God's richest blessings of peace and comfort to your entire family.*

*Be well in His "Arms of Love"...*  
*Mary Ann Wright | Charleston SC*

---

**Mary Ann Wright** - February 18 at 08:15 PM

BC

“ Felisa & Family;

*Memories are cherished photographs of the heart and we know that you will always remember your father, Dr. Harris. We are praying the Lord will comfort you in your loss.*

*Bible Way Church of Atlas, Columbia, SC*



---

**Bible Way Church of Atlas Road, Columbia** - February 18 at 05:34 PM

JT

“ Dr. James Harris, Jr. has been a family friend for 60 years. He was our Music Director at Hope Lutheran Church and Immanuel Lutheran Church in Detroit, MI. We attended band camps and our choir represented the Synod at their conventions. He made an impression on so many people and his legacy will live on in our hearts. We were blessed to have such a caring, talented teacher and musician for so many years. Sending love to the family and praying for comfort and strength as you cherish his memories.

Joyce Stearnes Thompson - February 16 at 10:57 PM

JR

Jim was a very private person, never spoken about himself but always helped and praised others. I new jim from virgina state music summer program. Much older than he, I remember his playing for a performance that the summer program was putting own. Little did I know years later, he would become my superintendent in Buffalo NY. He afford my select choir from the performing arts and experience of a lifetime. He submitted an audition tape to the National PTA ... YES we were selected on our try. The performance was in Sanfancisco. I and the students will always remember that exposure. Sending love to the family from someone who loved jim greatly. May he rest in peace. WORK WELL DONE.

Joyce robinson - February 17 at 03:07 PM

LJ

“ To the Harris family, my sincere condolences 🙏. I've known Dr. Harris from being a part of the Reformed Episcopal Church where my father use to preach. His music was awesome I enjoyed listening to him play. From the family of the late Rev. John H. and Georgianna Jenkins.



Lois Jenkins - February 15 at 04:20 PM

IP

“ *The family of Dr. James Harris Jr, we are so sorry to hear abt your loss. Our heartfelt sympathy goes out to you all. He will be sadly miss and may you always remember the fond memories that you spent while he was here with us. May God comfort you all doing this time of sorrow. The Durants*



---

**Idora Durant Pressley** - February 14 at 09:20 PM