

Houston's church mourns the death of a famous daughter

by [Barry Carter](#)

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NEWARK, N.J. (RNS) Everybody has a favorite Whitney Houston song, a memory that makes them stand still and think about how this soulful pop superstar made them feel when they heard her sing.

Remember the chill when she sang the national anthem at the 1991 Super Bowl, or how "I'm Every Woman" empowered women, providing confidence and inspiration?

But anyone who knew Houston understands that her talent came from one place, the God she served at the New Hope Baptist Church in Newark. This is where it all started for its daughter, where she was the darling of the choir as a child who left people speechless, belting out gospel songs and hymns. What she did through song on Sunday mornings, the members of her home church returned the favor on Sunday (Feb. 12) the only way they know how. They prayed.

They prayed for Emily Cissy Houston, Houston's mother, the minister of music for 54 years at the church.

"She needs you, God," the Rev. Joe Carter said. "I believe that he is shining his light on her right now and the only way she'll get through this is with the help and strength of our prayer."

They prayed for her family and for themselves. Everyone held hands, squeezing tightly. It was their way of saying everything is going to be all right, Cissy.

With broken hearts, they managed to dance and sing through three services, the choir raising its collective voice as if Whitney Houston herself were

there leading the way.

"One of the greatest voices of our time has been silenced, but she has left so much for us to live on," Carter said. "She left enough and so much for us to remember her for the rest of our lives, not only our lives but for generations that didn't even know her."

But Carter said the attention now should shift to privacy, the healing of the family and understanding that a mother has just lost her child. He said he's talked to the family and, for now, the less that is said is better. He chose instead to speak about the famous daughter's relationship with her mother, describing them as inseparable.

On Easter Sundays, he recalled, the two would sometimes sing a church favorite -- "He Would Not Come Down." It was an anthem of sorts, and mother and daughter moved the congregation, trading off vocally with one another, back and forth.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson, stopped by New Hope, embracing Carter in the pulpit as the congregation clapped below.

"This church shows the source of Whitney's soul," Jackson said after the service. "This is where she found her joy."

He said he spoke with Cissy Houston, trying to make sense of it all. "(Cissy) is a woman of great faith and she's steeped in the faith," Jackson said. "She's having to process this, the suddenness of it all."

Whitney Houston never forgot New Hope. Amid her stardom, media scrutiny and well-chronicled struggles with addiction, her church family said she always came back.

To the world she was Whitney Houston. At New Hope, she was plain old "Nippy," the skinny teenager with the big voice and vibrant smile they knew was headed for big things.

Inside the church, she always had a kind word for those she knew and acknowledged those she didn't. Nobody clamored for autographs. She'd sit among the people, to worship, just like them.

It's one of the reasons Jacqueline Kimble, a 45-year member of the church, misses her friend. She and Whitney sang in the alto section. They were teenagers, having fun, even though Kimble understood Whitney had something extra.

"She had a voice that would just make you smile, because you knew the songs she was singing were uplifting to the glory of God and she's left an indelible mark here at the New Hope Baptist Church and around the world," Kimble said.

Everyone at the church was cloaked in the comfort of each other and their faith. In many ways, it's like the lyrics from Whitney's 2009 comeback song -- "I Look to You."

"After all my strength is gone, in you I can be strong," she sang. "I look to you."