

Innovative Christian publisher Melvin E. Banks dies at 86

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue



(Courtesy photo)

Melvin E. Banks, founder of Urban Ministries, Inc., died on February 13. He was 86.

In 1970, UMI—the largest, independent, Black-owned Christian publishing company in the country—pioneered the practice of creating contextualized images of Black people in the Bible.

“So many people have been introduced to the life-changing message of Jesus because of Dr. Banks’ ground-breaking initiatives,” said Terri Hannett, UMI’s vice president in a statement.

In addition to the magazine *Urban Faith*, UMI has produced podcasts, books, music, Sunday school curricula, and vacation Bible school resources.

After graduating from Wheaton College in 1960 with a master’s in biblical studies, Banks began working at Scripture Press Publications trying to sell Eurocentric Sunday school materials to Black churches. It was that experience that inspired him to found UMI.

“When I grew up, all the Sunday school literature was produced by white people and all the writing was done from a white perspective,” Banks said in a 1990 interview with *Christianity Today*. “All the biblical characters were portrayed as white people. It dawned on me that the material as published did not connect.”

In addition to his work at UMI, Banks also planted Westlawn Gospel Chapel in Chicago and founded the Urban Outreach Foundation to support pastors, lay leaders, and Christian educators.

“Dr. Banks was a revolutionary publisher and a giant for the African American community,” said UMI’s current CEO C. Jeffrey Wright.