



"Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass

June 25, 1927 - May 20, 2026

N. UTICA – Lovingly known as “Mother of the Church,” Bernice (Guilford) Bass, age 98, was embraced by Christ’s hands, as He greeted her with unbounded love and amazing grace, when she entered into rest on Wednesday, May 20, 2026. Her children found caring for her effortless and each day they made it as pleasant as possible for her. They were by her side at the time of her peaceful passing.

Born in Isabella, Pennsylvania, on June 25, 1927, Bernice was the daughter of the late Bishop Hezekiah and Elvia (Mays) Guilford. She was raised and educated in Pomona, New Jersey, attending Egg Harbor City Public Schools and graduating from Egg Harbor City High School. She later attended cosmetology school in Atlantic City, where she became a talented and creative beautician. Bernice cared for women from her home salon, where many faithfully returned for her skill and kindness.

Bernice married the love of her life, Clifton Bass, on August 11, 1947. As a pastor’s wife, she walked beside her husband with such grace and an unwavering devotion to her Lord. They complemented one another with deep respect and a remarkable love and were committed on many levels. Bernice would often say, “I had the best, why settle for less?” affectionately referring to her beloved husband as “Chipper.” The couple shared 45 blessed years together prior to Clifton’s passing on May 2, 1993.

In August of 1975, Clifton relocated his family to the Utica area through a job opportunity that proved to be a tremendous blessing to his family. He lovingly referred to the area as "God's Country." Clifton faithfully served under the founder of Payne's Temple C.O.G.I.C., Elder John Payne. In 1977, Clifton became Assistant Pastor, and on May 19, 1991, he was appointed Pastor of the church. From the very beginning of his ministry involvement, Bernice faithfully stood by his side. Through her wisdom, congenial spirit, and devotion, she became the beloved First Lady of the church, serving under seven pastors, each of whom she loved dearly, including her present pastor, Pastor Todd J. Rodriguez-Spencer. She persevered in her calling and remained sincerely attentive and compassionate toward all people. Bernice also served as District Missionary, carrying additional responsibilities and further elevating both her title and her own spiritual journey. She was not only the Church Mother but a mother figure to all.

She could be remembered for many reasons, but above all else, it was her deep love and devotion to Jesus Christ that made her so captivating to others. Her calling began at an early age, witnessed first by her father, who recognized something majestic and profound within her spirit- all she ever knew was serving the Lord because she was truly one of "Hezekiah's Angels," which Hezekiah lovingly referred to his daughters as. Bernice carried within her heart a deep faith, trust, and love for the Lord, often describing it as though she could feel the fluttering of wings upon her shoulders. "Jesus is Real" was more than a phrase to Bernice, it was the way she lived her life. She knew her relationship with the Lord was genuine, virtuous, and rooted in love. She welcomed others into that space of faith, and when she spoke, people listened. They learned from her message because it was sincere and remarkably humbling.

Bernice offered encouragement, guidance, and inspiring faith to all who

crossed her path, always reminding others to trust in the Lord. She prayed for everyone and lived by the words, "We do the possible and God does the impossible!" Mother Bass was stoic in her faith, a quality greatly admired by others. She was loved, trusted, deeply respected.

Though age began to slow her somewhat in 2020, Bernice will never be forgotten. She lives on in the hearts and minds of innumerable fellow worshipers and the community at large. She walked it, talked it, and truly proved what it meant to become a believer devoted to the Lord. Peace of mind gave Bernice comfort throughout her life. She was never one for conflict or distress, but instead kept her household filled with harmony while glorifying Jesus at all times.

Most precious to Bernice was her family, along with her cherished church family, whom she considered an added blessing in her life. Her humility was rooted in the love she carried for others. She possessed qualities as rare and precious as gemstones, influencing those around her to remain mindful, compassionate, and tenderhearted. Bernice loved conversation and also possessed a spicy and sassy side that could be quite entertaining. In the proper setting, her quick wit and humor brought joy and laughter to those around her. She enjoyed caring for her collection of plants and flowers and loved Chanel's collection of perfumes. Bernice deeply appreciated nature and often reflected upon "how God created all things," admiring birds, animals, and the beauty of creation. Penguins and red cardinals held a special place among her favorite animals.

Children naturally embraced Mother Bass with joy and love, and she lovingly returned that affection. Her hugs were truly something special. She had a remarkable ability to recognize the children who needed a little extra care and compassion. Lighthearted and playful with them, she made young ones laugh

easily, and they naturally gravitated toward her gentle spirit.

Bernice firmly believed that nothing was too difficult through faith, often living by the words, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." To help provide for the needs of her family, Bernice worked throughout her life in several positions. She was employed with AT&T operating switchboards, a position through which she came to know many people. She later worked for Sears & Roebuck in the children's clothing department and eventually in the warranty department. Bernice also accepted a position with the Utica City School District working in its cafeterias, where she became affectionately known as "Grandma" because of her tender touch and loving presence.

Bernice was also a proud Red Hatter, a reflection of the fun-loving side of her personality. She enjoyed dining out and treasured the memories made while taking a cruise to Nassau with her daughter, an experience that brought her great joy and lasting happiness.

Angels were beautifully displayed throughout her home, often bringing comfort and peace. Bernice lived a fruitful life filled with gratitude and carried no regrets. Family reunions and trips back and forth to New Jersey to visit her sisters and loved ones brought her tremendous excitement and joy. Food was always an important expression of love to Bernice, and she became especially known as an amazing "Chicken Soup Maker."

Her beloved church home was Payne's Temple C.O.G.I.C., where she deeply loved the Lord, her Pastor, and her church family. The church remained a true second home to her throughout her life. Bernice's courage, perseverance, and unwavering dedication to her responsibilities inspired admiration from all who knew her, and many were strengthened by her remarkable fortitude.

Mother Bass is survived by her son, Dennis Lee Bass (the late Dorothy Bass);

daughter, Denise Ward; grandchildren, Keisha Bass, and Shameka Bass; Stanley, Veronica, and Gregory Sykes; and great-grandchildren, Myson, Keyomi; and Logan. She is further survived by her sister, Juanita Drinks (the late Elder James Drinks). Cherished were the memories of her late sisters and brothers-in-law, Evangelist Ernestine Cruz and Minister Francisco Cruz, Beatrice and Larkey Mays, Ida Mae and Bishop C.C. Mays, Alice Parker-Jones and Henry Jones, and Ruth and Charles Bass; and brothers, Eugene Guildford, William Guilford, and Hosea. She also leaves her sister-in-law, Versey Bass (the late Rev. Martin V. Bass). She had sweet nieces and handsome nephews, cousins; and four precious godchildren, Spring Smoakes, Karen Boykin, and Gina Henry. Among her many treasured friendships, she was especially blessed with her friend of over 60 years, Della Woods.

Mother Bass' children Dennis and Denise wish to extend their humble gratefulness to EVERYONE for their care, compassion, and prayers. The overwhelming sense of love being poured out by the community at large, as well as Pastor Todd J. Rodriguez-Spencer and the entire Payne's Temple C.O.G.I.C. family will be forever remembered. A special thank you to Drs. Lwin and Shwe Win for over 30 years of guidance and care rendered to Mother Bass. Thanks as well to the special nurses of the Wynn Hospital 5 East, who took exceptional care of Mother Bass, for which the family is deeply grateful.

Visitation will be held on Thursday, June 4, 2026, at Payne's Temple C.O.G.I.C., 811 John St., where her faith and devotion touched many, from 6:00-8:00 p.m. Mother Bass' Celebration of Life will commence on Friday, June 5, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. at Redeemer Church, 931 Herkimer Rd., Utica. Interment will follow in Forest Hill Cemetery alongside her beloved husband Clifton.

Cemetery Details

Forest Hill Cemetery

2201 Oneida Street
Utica, NY 13501
(315) 735-2701

Previous Events

Visitation

JUN 4. 6:00 PM - 8:00 PM (ET)

Payne's Temple COGIC
811 John St.
Utica, NY 13501
eannacefh@roadrunner.com

Celebration of Life

JUN 5. 10:00 AM (ET)

Redeemer Church
931 Herkimer Road
Utica, NY

Tribute Wall

EH

“ Sorry for your loss Denise & DENNIS BASS
GOD BLESS AND BE WITH THE FAMILY WITH IN SORROW AND
LOVE FOR MOTHER BASS WE ALL LOVED HER VERY BOTH
OF YOU KEEP YOUR HEAD UP HIGH HER LOVE IS STILL HER
(UNCLE EZEL & AUNT MARY AND ROSIE)
EZEL & ELDER MARY AND ROSIE HAWKINS & MOODY FAMILY

Ezel Hawkins - June 10 at 08:10 AM

AL

“ Alicia Lasnicki purchased the Florist Choice Bouquet for the family of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass.



Alicia Lasnicki - June 04 at 01:09 PM

LJ

“ Love always, Pookie and Jack purchased the In Heaven's Arms Bouquet for the family of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass.



Love always, Pookie and Jack - June 02 at 02:03 PM

LJ

“ Love always, Pookie and Jack planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass.

Love always, Pookie and Jack - June 02 at 02:03 PM

TP

“ Tom and Debbie Pearson purchased the Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum for the family of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass.



Tom and Debbie Pearson - May 31 at 08:35 PM

SH

“ Sheila Holliman lit a candle in memory of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass



Sheila Holliman - May 31 at 12:19 AM

SB

“ Aunt Bernice will always be remembered for beautiful warm spirit. May she rest in peace in the bosom of the Almighty. She will be greatly missed. Sending hugs and prayers of comfort to Dennis and Necee. I love both. Love,
Spring and family



Spring Bass-Smoaks - May 29 at 08:35 PM

SH

Rest in Peace Mother Bass Miss and Luv U from Sharon Hunt

Sharon Hunt - May 30 at 03:12 PM

ES

*Rest in Peace Mother Bass. S true woman of God who will be missed by many
I am so grateful and thankful to have known you. ❤️❤️❤️*

Evangelist Connie Scott - May 31 at 09:06 PM

TN

Rest in peace Mrs. Bass. Thought of you often through the years. Thought it's been many years you still have had a place in my heart. A beautiful lady and mom. Thank you for my friend Necee. Rest in the arms of our Lord now. Good and Faithful Servant.

Tamara M. Nicotera-Smith - June 03 at 08:35 AM

OC

“ *Overseer Angela U Carter lit a candle in memory of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass*



Overseer Angela U Carter - May 29 at 09:38 AM

OC

"I was sorry to hear about your mother's passing. Please accept my sincere condolences."

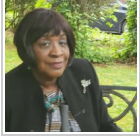
Overseer Angela U Carter - June 04 at 11:51 AM



“ *Carol Drinks lit a candle in memory of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass*



Carol Drinks - May 28 at 11:53 PM



“ *God can mend a broken/mourning heart if we give him all the pieces. Joy comes in the morning. Rest in Paradise Aunt Bernice.*

Carol Drinks, Riverdale, GA



Carol Drinks - May 28 at 11:51 PM

TN

“ *Trudy Nitti lit a candle in memory of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass*



trudy nitti - May 28 at 10:24 PM

TN

“ *Dear Bass family, my deepest condolences to you all. Where to begin, I first met Bernice at Jefferson Elementary school working in the cafeteria. She welcomed me with open arms. Oh, the stories she would tell, her beautiful smile and laughter. She took to my daughters when they were students at Jefferson and they loved calling her Grandma. I loved working with her. She lived a wonderful life. My thoughts and prayers are with you all.*

trudy nitti - May 28 at 10:21 PM

LH

“ Denise and family-we are so sorry to hear of the loss of your dear Mother. We are holding your family in our thoughts and prayers.

Chase and Laura Hunter

Laura Hunter - May 28 at 08:03 AM

VS

“ mother bass was such a beautiful person I'd adore her so much I'm going to truly miss you grandma rip my angel

Veronica sykes - May 27 at 11:36 PM

GF

“ Guilford Family purchased the Pink Tribute Spray for the family of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass.



Guilford Family - May 27 at 09:53 PM

GF

“ Guilford Family planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass.

Guilford Family - May 27 at 09:53 PM

MB

“ Muriel K. Banks lit a candle in memory of "Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass



Muriel K. Banks - May 27 at 08:32 PM

JD

“ I knew Bernice as Bernice, when I had the privilege to work side by side with her at Jefferson Elementary School many years ago. She was one of those truly special people who quietly made the world a better place just by being in it. Although she was probably in her early 70's then, she had an energy, sharpness, and wisdom that made her unforgettable.

She was sharp as a tack and had the most wonderful stories about her family and what life was like when she was growing up. I always loved listening to her. She was soft spoken, gentle, and kind, but she also had a wonderful sense of humor that could make you laugh out loud when you least expected it.

What stood out most was the goodness in her heart. She deeply cared for all the children and treated everyone with warmth and respect. In all the years I knew her, I never once heard her speak badly about anyone. She always seemed to find the good in people, even when others could not.

The memories I have of her are some of the sweetest from those years. She carried herself with grace, compassion, and quiet strength, and I feel very fortunate to have known her and worked beside her. She will always be remembered with great fondness and love.

Joann Drescher - May 27 at 05:47 PM

RM

“ Richard J Mas purchased the Simply Elegant Sp
athiphyllum for the family of "Mother of the
Church" Bernice (Guilford) Bass.



Richard J Mas - May 27 at 11:15 AM

RM

“ Richard J Mas planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of "Mother of the
Church" Bernice (Guildord) Bass.

Richard J Mas - May 27 at 11:15 AM

RS

“ My condolences to Mother Bass family.



Roseann Simmons - May 27 at 09:27 AM

SB

“ Susan Bynum lit a candle in memory of
"Mother of the Church" Bernice (Guilford)
Bass



Susan Bynum - May 26 at 07:10 PM