Minister Franklin D. R. Florence's pulpit has been Rochester for 26 years.

STILL FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

From the segregated South to his pulpit in Rochester, Minister Franklin Florence has never shrunk from controversy

BY JAMES GOODMAN

THE NAME IN ROCHESTER HAS COME to mean the activist clergyman in continual confrontation.

His baritone voice boomed through the meeting rooms of the Eastman Kodak Co. two decades ago, as he demanded jobs for unemployed blacks.

It also echoed inside the walls of Attica Correctional Facility several years later, as he said to rebellious inmates, "All of us are prisoners."

And it was heard in the chambers of City Council last December, as he taunted council members who walked outto protest his behavior, "I feel honored tonight to know that when John the Baptist performed in the wilderness, the city officials didn't show up."

Minister Franklin D. R. Florence's pulpit for the past 26 years has been Rochester. In that time, he has been one of the most forceful and controversial figures in the city.

But his roots are in the segregated South.

The South, birthplace of the civil rights movement of three decades ago, gave Florence an abrasiveness that's never dulled.

His politics are fueled by a sense of outrage that began almost 51 years ago in Miami.

It's an outrage that Florence sometimes expresses in outrageous ways. It's an outrage that also has led Florence to view issues literally in black and white.

MIAMI, SEGREGATED AND HOSTILE TO BLACKS during the 30s and 40s, is still very much with Florence.

Phrases like "white folk" and "black folk" flow freely from him.

"Overtown," as the once-bustling black neighborhood in northwest Miami was called, is where Florence grew up.

It is a place where black culture thrived.

Even blacks who moved elsewhere in the Miami area often returned — or went "over town" — for business, shopping and entertainment.

This part of Miami, the scene of extensive rioting in 1980 and 1982, was, in the 1930s, the only place in the city where blacks were welcome.

By nightfall, the white merchants of Overtown left the area until the next day — and racial lines were even more clearly drawn.

"After 5 o'clock, blacks were not allowed to go across Fifth Avenue," Florence says. "Just like they didn't let us on Fifth Avenue, no white would ever be caught on Second Avenue after 5 o'clock."

Overtown blacks grew up with black heroes. Entertainers such as Ethel Waters, Pearl Bailey and Sarah Vaughan would come to Overtown to play the clubs.

"Second Avenue — that was like in the heart of Harlem," Florence says. "The white folk had their Miami Beach. The black folk had their Second Avenue."

Florence grew up in a one-story house on 9th Street.

His father, Hozel, was born in Georgia, worked on the railroads, drove a taxi and sold ice. He died when Franklin was 3.

His mother, Bertha, worked as a domestic for a *Miami Herald* executive who was a staunch supporter of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Franklin D. R. Florence, her fourth child, was born Aug. 9, 1934.

Bertha, who remarried Henderson Beasely, a longshoreman, was a Baptist converted to the Church of Christ. Freeman A. Tarver, the evangelist who converted her, went door-to-door preaching the gospel.

Bertha joined the 12th Street Church of Christ, which Tarver founded, and has remained a devout member ever since.

She instilled religion in the family. Her children were read the Bible each evening. A bedroom in the house — called the "prophet's room" — was set aside for visiting preachers.

To this day, she often carries a Bible in her purse. "When she sees someone, she just talks to them about the Lord," says Tarver's son, Otis.

Church of Christ members believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible. Organ music, for example, is prohibited in services because the Bible makes no reference to organ music.

But Churches of Christ in Miami's white neighborhoods — like many other institutions outside Overtown in the 1940s — were off-limits for blacks.

White Church of Christ members would occasionally visit the 12th Street Church of Christ, but they refused to shake hands with the black members.

Florence has other bitter childhood memories. Still vivid is the bus ride when his mother, who was sitting next to a "colored" sign, was nonetheless told by a white man to give up her seat because all the other seats were taken.

Florence also tells of the time a Woolworth's store clerk ignored his mother and kept waiting on white customers in line behind her.

"So my sister, Dorothy, spoke up, and a white man ran a cart into my mother."

The hopes of Overtown played out in the boxing ring.

"On my street, when Joe Louis fought, our neighborhood was like a ghost town," Florence says. "You wouldn't hear a word.

"Everybody was pulling for Joe. And when he'd knock his man out, it was like Mardi Gras. People stayed out all night just having fun — eating and celebrating because, vicariously, we shared Joe's victory over white folks."

Arthur Eve, who is now the deputy speaker of the New York Assembly, has known Florence since they attended nursery school together. He remembers the night Louis came out of retirement in 1951 to fight Rocky Marciano.

"None of us wanted him to come back," Eve says. "We wanted him to stay in retirement because he was old.

"He was undefeated world champion and we felt that the white community put the money out there to fight so Marciano could defeat him.

"I'll never forget that fight, listening on the radio. My mother, my grandmother — everybody was just crying like babies.

"They just didn't want him to remain the great undefeated champion."

FLORENCE WAS DRAWN TO THE MINISTRY BY Marshall Keeble, the black evangelist who crisscrossed the South and emerged as one of the most influential ministers in the Church of Christ.

Keeble, the son of freed slaves, reportedly baptized more than 40,000 converts and established 350 churches before he died in 1969 at the age of 89.

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The activism that was to gripFlorence's generation of preachers was not part of Keeble's evangelism. He interpreted the scriptures without reference to the social problems of his day and did not become involved in political causes.

Keeble also served as president of Nashville Christian Institute, which was a predominantly black elementary and secondary school affiliated with the Church of Christ. Many of its students became ministers.

"Boy preachers," chosen from promising students, would travel with Keeble throughout the South to recruit students, spread the gospel and raised money for the school.

"What would happen, he would generally bring three or four of us for two-week trips," says Fred Gray, a former "boy preacher" who later served as a lawyer for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The "boy preachers" were introduced to crowds by Keeble and then recited passages from the Bible.

"It was an attraction," says Thomas A. Jackson, a nephew of Keeble and former student at Nashville Christian. "The idea was to show a product of the school."

On one of these trips, Keeble and Gray stayed at Florence's home in Overtown — and recruited him. He attended Nashville Christian from 1948 to 1952 and became a "boy preacher."

He was also captain of the basketball team and met his wife-to-be, Mary, daughter of a Church of Christ minister in Georgia.

Florence then attended Pepperdine College in Los Angeles. The college, now called Pepperdine University, is affiliated with the Church of Christ.

But Los Angeles, says Florence, was like a foreign country, and after two years, he dropped out of Pepperdine.

FLORENCE RETURNED TO Florida, where he was ordained a minister in West Palm Beach and named pastor of the 18th Street Church of Christ there. Mary, still at Nashville Christian while he was in Los Angeles, joined him.

The Kennedys' winter home was in neighboring Palm Beach,

Florence, Malcolm X and Connie Mitchell, a Rochester community activist. Florence still has a tape of the 1965 speech Malcolm X gave at the Corn Hill Methodist Church.

but the large black population of West Palm Beach served rather than shared in the riches of this resort town. "Afromobiles" were still in use. These three-wheeled carriages, powered by blacks on bicycles, were a popular form of transportation for whites in Palm Beach's plush hotel district.

In 1955, blacks were barred from many public places — from golf courses to hotels.

Florence and several other activists, who belonged to a group called Concerned Citizens, challenged segregative practices. They went to restaurants suspected of serving only whites — and ate.

Florence, recalls Roderick Stevens, a member of the group, once told a local black PTA meeting, "Some day the bottom will be at the top and the top at the bottom."

When Florence registered to vote in West Palm Beach, he enrolled as a Republican. The Democrats, Florence says, gave blacks nothing in return for their support.

Saul Alinsky at FIGHT convention.

IN 1959, FLORENCE WAS RE-cruited to be pastor of the Reynolds Street Church of Christ in Rochester. He had been recommended by Minister Alonzo Rose of Atlanta, who was trying to build up Churches of Christ congregations in the North.

The Reynolds Street church had a membership of about 50. Florence was paid $65 a week plus given use of the two-bedroom apartment above the church at 37 Reynolds St.

Florence moved to Rochester at a time many other blacks from the South were drawn to the city because of reports of prosperity.

By 1960, the black population of Monroe County had grown to 24,184, more than three times what it was in 1950. And it grew to 32,000 by 1964.

The job market for skilled workers was promising. But most of the black migrants weren't skilled and those who were complained of discrimination by employers.

Many of the new arrivals lived in overcrowded and often decrepit housing in the Joseph Avenue and Clarissa Street areas.

White city residents, meanwhile, were moving to the outskirts of the city and surrounding towns.

The segregative housing patterns forced upon blacks in Miami were similarly being forced upon blacks in Rochester.

Florence soon associated with a group of black activists who regularly met at the Greig Street home of Constance and John Mitchell.

He also joined the local chapter of the NAACP and eventually became its first vice president.

At the same time, Florence's congregation grew to more than 100 members. Some were attracted by his activism, but others say they joined because of his preaching.

"I liked what I heard," says Willa Jean Jones, who joined the Reynolds Street Church soon after she arrived from Palmetto, Fla., in 1960. "He taught right from the Bible."

FLORENCE FIRST GAINED public recognition for speaking out in several cases involving questionable police conduct.

On Aug. 22, 1962, Rufus Fairwell, a 28-year-old black, was locking up the Plymouth Avenue gas station where he worked when he was approached about 11 p.m. by two policemen who claimed Fairwell was breaking in.

In the ensuing scuffle, Fairwell suffered two broken vertebrae, a torn back muscle and head injuries.

The case drew national attention when the U.S. Department of Justice obtained indictments against the two officers for violating Fairwell's civil rights. Neither officer was convicted.

Florence's first public appearance in a public forum in Rochester came at a rally called by Fairwell's supporters.

Several months later, Florence gained greater prominence.

On Jan. 26, 1963, A.C. White, a black foundry worker arrested for drunken driving, suffered a fractured wrist, a broken finger and multiple body bruises while in police custody.

Four police officers involved in the incident were suspended — but reinstated a month later without loss of pay.

Florence and Josh Lofton, a member of his Reynolds Street congregation, were at Ray Daniels' barber shop on Prospect Street — one of the informal gathering places in the 11th Ward — when Daniels suggested they see for themselves how badly White was hurt.

The three trooped into Strong Memorial Hospital in search of White. "We weren't welcomed with open arms," Lofton recalls.

Hospitals officials refused to reveal White's whereabouts, but

a black maintenance worker at the hospital pointed to the room White was in, Florence says.

Pictures of White taken by Daniels show the back of White's head shaven because of wounds there and both hands heavily bandaged.

Florence also spoke out after police charged 19 black Muslims with rioting, assault and unlawful assembly. The Muslims were charged after scuffling with police on Jan. 6, 1963, at their North Street meeting place. The officers were investigating a tip that a man with a gun was in the building.

He said at a November 1963 public forum at the University of Rochester that the Muslims were being "persecuted by the hand of law enforcement because of their religious beliefs."

It was also during this period that Florence developed a friendship with Malcolm X, the black Muslim who had a national following identifying with his call for black pride and militancy.

"He was tall, eyes piercing — Malcolm exuded strength," says Florence about his first impressions of Malcolm X when he saw the imposing figure emerge from the crowd in New York City's Harlem.

"I saw people gather," Florence recalls. "This guy said, 'You're going to hear and see something that you have never seen or heard before.'

"Malcolm talked about the new black man, the discovery of self. He said there was a rise of self-respect among blacks and a realization of inequities in America."

Malcolm X repeated his message during visits to Rochester.

Florence still has a tape of a rousing speech Malcolm X gave on Feb. 16, 1965, at the Corn Hill Methodist Church.

The speech was given five days before Malcolm X was assassinated in New York City.

"Malcolm's name was on the lips of this community — people were talking about it," Florence says about that speech.

"That man, he left us so proud of being black.

"People were on a high for a month. And Malcolm was quoted more than Walter Cronkite.

"Malcolm spoke for the man who was saying, 'No more gradualism for the system. Everything wrong about it had to come to an end.' "

William Kunstler and Florence at the Attica prison negotiations.

The militancy expressed by Malcolm X that night had already erupted in Rochester. In July 1964, Rochester erupted in three days of racial unrest sparked by an arrest at a street dance in a predominantly black neighborhood.

Florence was in Miami visiting his family when the riot started. But he was soon to attract national attention.

AT A MEETING OF ACTIVISTS in early 1965, Florence was chosen to head the steering committee organizing FIGHT, the black activist organization formed in Rochester with the help of Saul Alinsky, the Chicago-based community organizer.

FIGHT — an acronym that originally stood for Freedom, Integration, God, Honor, Today — was formed to provide Rochester's black neighborhoods with a "community organization."

The acronym is derived from a Biblical reference urging people to "FIGHT the good fight of faith."

Florence, says Stewart Moot, a Rochester lawyer who drafted the FIGHT constitution, "was very dynamic, very bright, very articulate and totally unafraid."

Florence was formally elected president of FIGHT at the organization's first annual convention in June 1965.

"For those who trust the people, it is a dawn of a new generation of hope," Florence told a crowd of about 1,500. "For those who fear the people, it is rightly cause for fear and trembling."

Jobs for unemployed blacks were a priority for Florence, and he first approached the Xerox Corp.

Edward Chambers, one of two Alinsky organizers dispatched to Rochester, recalls the first time Florence met Xerox executives.

"The guys got up very friendly, stuck out their hands and Florence walked by them all."

But by January 1966, after several meetings between Florence and Xerox officials, the company started its Step-Up program, which provided training and jobs for applicants who might not otherwise qualify.

Florence's next adversary was the Eastman Kodak Co., which in 1964 had only about 600 blacks in a workforce of 26,000.

Florence arranged a series of meetings with Kodak's top executives in the fall of 1966 by calling Albert Chapman, then chairman of the board for Kodak.

Florence demanded that Kodak hire 600 people with "limited education and skills" over an 18-month period. And he insisted FIGHT recruit them.

The demand was presented in September 1966 at a meeting Florence had with top Kodak officials, who weren't accustomed to Florence's style.

"Negotiations usually mean a two-way, back-and-forth," says Thomas Robertson, who was in charge of Kodak's public relations. "It was simply one side making demands."

William Vaughn, then president of Kodak, refused to commit the company to a "specific and substantial" hiring quota.

So Florence took his demands to the streets and led demonstrations to Kodak headquarters on State Street.

Once inside the building, Florence acted like he was leading a religious revival.

He uttered demands for jobs, and depending on how he coached them, the protesters would respond, "No, man" or "Yes, man."

At one point, Kodak advertised that blacks interested in jobs should report to the Kodak offices for interviews.

Several dozen blacks showed up. And so did Florence, who considered Kodak's advertisement a ploy.

After he told job seekers not to apply, Florence stormed out of the interview room and, according to Robertson, shouted from the second-floor balcony to an ABC cameraman waiting below, "No jobs. No jobs."

"The people left out felt they had a champion," Moot says about Florence's appeal. "He was controversial in the white community but not the black community — at least not during the early stages of FIGHT."

Florence's mistrust of whites deepened when Kodak officials voided an agreement Florence had signed with John Mulder, a Kodak assistant vice president.

The agreement was signed on Dec. 20, 1966. It committed Kodak to recruit "600 unemployed people" over a two-year period.

But three days later, Kodak announced the agreement was void. "Mulder's signing the paper was simply unauthorized," says Vaughn.

Kodak's reversal embittered Florence. "He was livid," Chambers recalls. "He said, 'You told me you could trust whites.' "

Florence continued to battle Kodak at the company's annual stockholders' meeting in Flemington, N.J., in April 1967.

About 700 FIGHT members and supporters filled 10 buses for the all-night trip.

Florence led a delegation of about 60 into the high school auditorium packed with Kodak stockholders. The rest of the FIGHT backers marched outside.

As Vaughn called the meeting to order, Florence popped up from his third-row seat.

"You have a point of order?" Vaughn asked.

"Yes, sir," said Florence. "Are you going to honor the Dec. 20 agreement?"

Florence and the rest of the delegation then walked out.

In the weeks that followed, Kodak continued to reject Florence's demands.

The conflict abated when Louis Eilers, the new Kodak president, sent Florence a telegram in June 1967 recognizing FIGHT as "a broad-based community organization."

The telegram also said the newly created Rochester Jobs Inc. — a non-profit group created to help find jobs for the unemployed — "promises to be an effective way of providing job opportunities for the hard-core unemployed."

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BUT THE AGREEMENT hardly took the steam out of Florence — or FIGHT.

A resolution adopted at the 1967 FIGHT convention demanded that Rochester Jobs change from a "top-heavy executive silk-tie organization to one where the poor will be equally represented."

Florence, re-elected for a second one-year term in 1966, both attracted and alienated people as president of FIGHT.

Minister Raymond Scott, who later served as president of FIGHT, was a divinity student living in Buffalo in 1966 when he met Florence.

"He was the first *black man* I've ever met," says Scott about the black pride Florence exuded. "He had charisma. He was a strong man."

But Florence also could antagonize.

"Some middle-class blacks who had skills and could and should have made contributions felt alienated and intimidated by his style," says DeLeon McEwen, who succeeded Florence as president. "If you didn't live right down in the community, you weren't welcomed."

Differences between Florence and other members of FIGHT crystallized over the issue of desegregation of public schools.

The "black community," as Florence saw it, suffered from the city Board of Education's attempt to integrate city schools by busing blacks from predominantly black to predominantly white schools.

"Integration is a smokescreen," Florence said at FIGHT's 1967 convention. "As long as you are a second-class citizen, those who claim to be first-class citizens will never integrate."

FIGHT members attending the convention voted, at Florence's urging, to change the meaning of "I" in FIGHT from "integration" to "independence."

That year, Florence was prevented from running for president because FIGHT's bylaws forbid a person from serving three successive terms.

But Florence was re-elected in 1968. And he ran again in 1969, but lost to Bernard Gifford, a 26-year-old graduate student at the University of Rochester.

Florence and Gifford differed sharply in their views.

Florence says Gifford was an "integrationist" who failed to understand the role of FIGHT.

"FIGHT was a system that the power structure couldn't control, had no inroads to, had no influence over," Florence says.

Gifford criticized Florence for his reluctance to work with other activist groups.

"Franklin thought FIGHT was the sole representative of the community and that there was no good reason for any other black group," says Gifford, who is now dean of the graduate school of education at the University of California at Berkeley.

The 1970 FIGHT convention at the War Memorial became the battleground for the Florence and Gifford camps.

Florence lost decidedly in the official voting that night — receiving 151 votes to Gifford's 1,134 votes.

Florence neverthless declared victory. He claimed that people who weren't FIGHT members had voted for Gifford and that a group of about 75 of his supporters had elected him president by voice vote on the morning of the convention.

Florence also claimed he was elected a second time by about 100 of his supporters meeting shortly before the official evening session began.

After this second meeting, Florence supporters — some reportedly holding clubs disguised as campaign devices with red crepe paper on the ends — tried to stop Gifford from taking the stage. "I thought I was going to get my head bashed in," Gifford recalls.

Four days later, Florence confronted Gifford at FIGHT's office. Florence was charged with criminal trespass and harassment after Gifford complained to police. The charges were later dismissed.

Three days later, the Rochester Area Ministers Conference, a coordinating group for black churches, expelled Florence because he "contributed to and condoned actions by his supporters which were conducive to violence and bloodshed."

That September, Florence

was ousted as pastor of his Reynolds Street church. About 60 of the 110-member congregation approved the church trustees' recommendation for dismissal.

Relations between Florence and some church members had become strained as he became increasingly involved in FIGHT.

"The brethren had asked him to make a decision between the two," a Reynolds Street church member, Altha Lofton, says. "They felt FIGHT was a full-time job and the church was a full-time job."

Florence's behavior at the 1970 convention, several church members say, created further friction. And it prompted the trustees to vote for dismissal.

Florence says he had moments of intense loneliness during this turmoil.

But he considered himself an outsider only to the "Negro establishment."

"I was what they didn't want to be reminded of," Florence says. "People were tired of confrontation."

The financial strain resulted in the repossession of Florence's Mercury Monterey.

But he kept preaching.

Florence and about three dozen followers from the Reynolds Street Church started the Central Church of Christ. The congregation met in the basement of what was then the Calvary Baptist Church on Genesee Street.

Many of the Reynolds Street members who left with Florence had been involved in FIGHT and other community groups.

In 1974, after being temporarily housed in three other locales, the congregation moved to the church building at 101 S. Plymouth Ave.

ON SEPT. 9, 1971, ATTICA prison erupted.

About 2,800 prisoners gained control of the prison's D yard and held 43 prison employees hostage.

Florence, known because of his FIGHT activities, was among about three dozen observers requested by the rebellious prisoners.

Florence arrived at Sept. 11 — a Saturday morning — and entered D yard for the first time that afternoon.

He met Richard Clark, a leader of the rebellion.

"There was no fears in Clark I could detect," Florence says. "He told me he was a Muslim, a follower of Malcolm X."

Throughout the day, the observers tried to decide what they could do.

Some wanted to mediate; others — including Florence — identified with the prisoners, who depended on the observers to inform prison officials outside of their demands.

On Sunday afternoon, Florence again entered D yard with a team of eight other observers headed by State Assemblyman Eve.

Clark once again met the observers. He was angry because the prisoners believed that the observers wanted them to accept the concessions offered by Russell Oswald, the commissioner of the state Department of Correctional Services.

"I looked into his eyes and told Art, 'Something is wrong,' " Florence recalls.

"I said, 'Clark is not acting like himself.' He didn't embrace us. He's very stern, somber — serious.

"Clark then informed us that the word had filtered back to them that we had turned against them. . . ."

None of this was true, Florence says, but the prisoners had to be convinced that was so.

Clark, Florence says, then warned the observers, "Brothers, you may never see your families again or leave the yard again.

"The men are upset and for you to get out of here, you'll have to talk to them because they are going to kill you."

Florence was given the microphone and gave a speech that he calls "A Tale of Two Cities."

"I talked about how they were walled from within and we were walled from without — and to show what that system does to them and what it is doing to us," Florence says.

"You don't plan these speeches. This really had to come extemporaneously — and pronto.

"We were literally speaking for our lives.

"You have an expression, 'The preacher came.' That eve-

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ning, the preacher was really there. Because if the preacher had not come, this preacher would not be here."

Florence now says that was his best speech ever.

And the observers left D yard unharmed.

SINCE ATTICA, FLORENCE HAS FOCUSED more on electoral politics.

He made an unsuccessful bid in 1972 as the Liberal Party's candidate for the 131st District seat in the state Assembly.

In the early 70s, he was in charge of voter registration for the United Church Ministries, which succeeded the Rochester Area Ministers Conference as the coordinating group for black churches.

He is a member of the Concerned Citizens Committee, a group of about 15 local black leaders who meet monthly to plan election strategy and discuss related issues.

Florence also headed up local organizing for the 1984 presidential bid by the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, and he now chairs the Rochester Rainbow Coalition chapter that evolved out of the campaign.

But Florence has never abandoned confrontational politics.

He heads the McCuller Committee — a group of local black ministers and community activists demanding police reform — and led the protest last December that disrupted a City Council meeting.

The committee, which was formed after the November 1983 fatal shooting of a black woman, Alecia McCuller, by a city police officer, claims that the police review proposal adopted by the council in December was too weak.

Florence also still suggests that FIGHT, which has been inactive since the late 1970s, might someday be revived around the principles he espoused while president.

And he's unwavering in his belief that radical change is needed.

God is on the side of the poor, according to Florence's interpretation of the Bible.

"Capitalism says you make money. But Jesus says as much as you do it to the least of these, you do it unto me."

Florence's identification with the poor similarly runs through his sermons.

"Those who mistreat the poor will themselves be mistreated," Florence said during a 1½-hour oration on a recent Sunday.

FLORENCE REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST controversial figures in Rochester. But one thing both his supporters and critics agree on is his tenacity.

On his bookshelf is *A Time to Die*, the account by *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker of the Attica prison uprising. The book bears the inscription:

To Franklin Florence — A fighter if there ever was one. With much respect. Tom Wicker.

JAMES GOODMAN is a reporter for the Democrat and Chronicle.