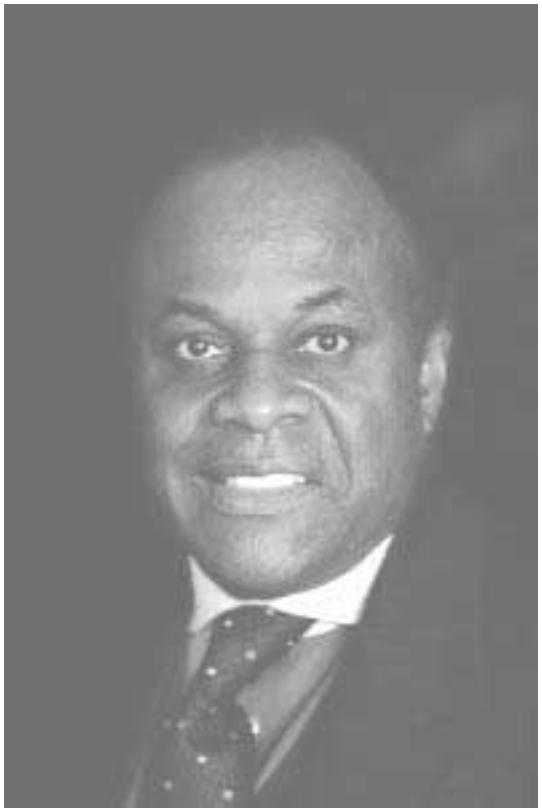
Dr. W. Franklyn Richardson is already juggling a heavy schedule.

By JEREMY M. LAZARUS
Special to Trice Edney News Wire from the Richmond Free Press

WASHINGTON (TEWire) – Dr. W. Franklyn Richardson is already juggling a heavy schedule.

The broad-shouldered minister heads a 4,000-member church with congregations in New York and Florida. He's also chairman and chief spokesman of the revived Conference of National Black Churches, an umbrella group of nine historically Black denominations that addresses national issues and promotes church involvement in education and health care.

And he's actively involved in a variety of other organizations, including the Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network. Still, the former pastor of two Richmond-area churches is ready to take on another challenging leadership job: chairman of the board of trustees of Virginia Union University, his alma mater.

The 61-year-old Philadelphia native was elected to the post last week in a telephone poll of the 23-member board, according to Dr. Benjamin J. Lambert III, the Richmond optometrist and former state senator who heads the VUU board's nominating committee.

A longtime board member and current vice chairman, Richardson will succeed Dr. Frank S. Royal, the prominent Church Hill physician who has held the chairmanship for 30 years. Royal announced last month that he wanted to spend more time with his grandchildren and would not seek a new term as chairman, though he will remain on the board.

"This is the highest honor of my career," Richardson told the Free Press, after being reached at the Miami airport where his travel had been stalled by a snowstorm farther north. "This is an opportunity to give back to the institution that invested so much in me," he said. "I have had a stellar career in the ministry. But I would not be where I am today without the education I received at Virginia Union."

He said he would make time for his work for VUU and planned to use his wealth of contacts in the church and corporate worlds to assist the university president with "resource development for Virginia Union," which traces its roots to a school created in Richmond after the Civil War to educate newly freed slaves.

"I believe I can open some doors that wouldn't be open otherwise," said Richardson, who was saluted as the 2010 Alumnus of the Year during homecoming in October. Richardson will assume the chairmanship Feb. 4, when the 145-year-old, Baptist-affiliated school celebrates Founders' Day.

Richardson said he is taking over at a time of optimism for the school under current President Claude G. Perkins. He noted that VUU was just re-accredited, has been able to increase enrollment and has improved its campus. It also is upgrading academics and looking to restore a degree in the fine arts it dropped several years ago.

Richardson “has such tremendous credentials” and will be a “worthy successor to Dr. Royal,” said Dr. Lucille M. Brown, a retired Richmond schools superintendent and longtime VUU board member. She served on the nominating committee and said Richardson is well known for his loyalty to the school, noting that his church, Grace Baptist of Mount Vernon, N.Y., and Port St. Lucie, Fla., donated the stained glass windows at VUU’s Coburn Hall.

The minister’s ties with Richmond go back 43 years, when he left Philadelphia to come to VUU after his pastor, the Rev. John Hamlin, recommended the school. Richardson had already accepted the call to ministry and had preached his first sermon.

He said Dr. LaVerne Byrd Smith helped him improve his reading skills, enabling him to succeed in class. He also was president of the freshman and sophomore classes. His ministry career quickly began soaring. In 1969, still an undergraduate, he was called to lead Rising Mount Zion Baptist Church, then located in the city’s Fulton neighborhood.

He became busier when he also became pastor of Saint James Baptist in Varina and did not complete his VUU degree until 1979. He went on to earn his master’s in theology at Yale and his doctorate from United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

He left Richmond in the mid-1970s to go to Grace Baptist, which now includes celebrities among its membership. He has been on the national church stage since the 1980s, when he served as general secretary and chief operating officer for the 33,000-congregation National Baptist Conference USA during the 12-year tenure of President Dr. T.J. Jemison.