

Letty Russell, liberationist and churchwoman: A pioneer feminist theologian

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Letty Mandeville Russell is being remembered as a gifted scholar and teacher, and as a pioneer in what many call the first generation of feminist theologians.

Delivering the annual Paul Tillich lecture at Harvard University in May 2006, a little more than a year before her death July 12, Russell told her audience that the role of the church is “to overcome the fear of difference and to break the bars that keep us apart.”

Russell, 77, who died at her home in Guilford, Connecticut, “pioneered feminist theology not only in theology and ethics but also in biblical studies,” said Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a German theologian at Harvard Divinity School.

“Letty was not only a great liberation theologian but also a great churchwoman,” said Schüssler Fiorenza. “She knew how to utilize the resources of church and university for nurturing a feminist movement around the world.”

A longtime member of the faculty of Yale Divinity School, where she had taught since 1974, Russell was a graduate of Wellesley College, Massachusetts, and earned graduate degrees from Harvard Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Until her death, Russell participated in work for the World Council of Churches and the World YWCA, according to Yale officials.

Russell served for a time as a consultant to the WCC’s U.S. working group on the participation of women. She was also a member of the World Council’s Faith and Order Commission and much involved in the work of the National Council of Churches and the United Presbyterian Church—predecessor to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—of which she was an ordained minister.

Among 17 books Russell authored or edited is *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretations of the Church*, in which she drew upon the early Christian history of house churches as a model for alternative leadership styles. -Chris Herlinger, *Ecumenical News International*