

Theologian Bloesch, 82, sought renewal in UCC while resisting literalists

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 5, 2010](#) issue

Donald G. Bloesch, a theologian who as a United Church of Christ minister actively critiqued his denomination's liberal tendencies yet found faults with some forms of evangelical theology, died August 24 in Dubuque, Iowa.

Sometimes seen as distinctive for seeking ecumenical orthodoxy and progressive evangelicalism, Bloesch found his academic home at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, where he taught from 1957 to 1992. The school has ties to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Named an emeritus professor, Bloesch retired in order to concentrate on finishing his seven-volume systematic theology, the Christian Foundation Series. Among his other works is the two-part *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*.

In his activist mode, Bloesch was the principal author of the Dubuque Declaration, a foundational statement in 1978 of the UCC's "evangelical renewal" group now known as the Biblical Witness Fellowship.

Bloesch held degrees from Elmhurst College, Chicago Theological Seminary, the University of Chicago and Doane College. He did postdoctoral work at the universities of Oxford, Tübingen and Basel.

In a biographical summary of Bloesch's theological studies and teaching, Elmer M. Colyer of Dubuque Theological Seminary said the pastor's son from Bremen, Indiana, "was not prepared for what he described as the extreme liberal theology" that he found at Chicago Theological Seminary.

Colyer, writing in the mid-1990s, said Bloesch believed that theology had veered toward "what Martin Buber called 'a conceptual letting go of God' in which theology is viewed as a humanly useful reflection on human experience, but is unable to

provide any conceptual or rational content with reference to the 'Object' of faith."

Yet Colyer wrote that Bloesch was "dissatisfied with the theological right (fundamentalism and certain strands of evangelicalism) and its pronounced rationalism" which failed to provide a viable alternative to liberal propositions.

The UCC's announcement of Bloesch's death affirmed that "Bloesch's critique of the UCC's liberal leaning was tempered by his warnings of conservative orthodoxy's missteps."

The majority of Bloesch's early books were concerned with Christian renewal. *Centers of Christian Renewal* (1964) and *Wellsprings of Renewal* (1974) deal with renewal through religious communities. *The Reform of the Church* (1970) and *The Invaded Church* (1974) outlined a program for reviving the church's life, ministry and outreach in light of the forces of secularization infiltrating the church, according to Colyer.

"Few people realize what a strategic role [his wife] played in Bloesch's career as an author," Colyer wrote. While studying in Geneva, the American theologian from Iowa met and later married Brenda Mary Jackson, who was from the United Kingdom. Evangelical in perspective and theologically adept, she served as his copy editor and research associate.