

Two of a kind: Century board members Paul Simon and Al Ward

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 13, 2004](#) issue

"Oner," a slang word that crossword-puzzle-makers favor, is defined as a "rare and unique person, someone especially excellent." We just lost two oners: Century board members Paul Simon and Al Ward. Each was an *exemplum*, which medieval dictionaries defined as something cut out, "like a clearing in the woods." Clearings define the woods, let light in and permit cultivation. Paul and Al both defined a *Christian* way of life in the dark-woods worlds of politics and corporations. They helped dispel darkness. They did not pursue careers; they cultivated vocations.

Through the half-century since I first met Paul we often socialized, campaigned, exchanged book manuscripts. I dedicated one book to him and his brother, Art, founder of Bread for the World. Paul mentored son John Marty, a Minnesota state senator. But it's too easy for a writer to turn this kind of tribute into autobiography, trading off the glory of the one being honored. So I'll recede.

Paul was a political warrior who had a gentle touch and generous ways. Mutual friends have suggested I write about his faith, a neglected feature in the civic accolades heaped upon him. Compare Isaiah 58 and similar scriptures with Paul's congressional voting record. It's 100 percent Isaianic. (Paul is not here to blush and say "Come off it," but he would have. I don't care. I am supposed to write the truth.)

A faithful church person who was an usher in his Carbondale, Illinois, Lutheran congregation, Paul was often attacked by the right wing of his own denomination. He listened to and lived the gospel as an informed lay Christian minister, "ordained by his baptism." An *exemplum*.

You may not know Al, who served on boards too numerous to mention, all of them devoted to human services. Al was the father-in-law to our son Pastor Peter Marty. That's a sufficiently distant relationship for me not to have to declare an interest. But I do declare an interest: in setting before readers the example of another Christian layperson who made a difference in our world.

A Yale football star, he was drafted by the Chicago Bears but then redrafted by the U.S. military. Back in civilian life he became a foreman at a melting plant, and worked his way up to become the CEO of a steel company. When that company merged with another, he sensed that an impersonal bottom-line-only style would dominate. So he left, connected with other Christians and worked in the voluntary sector, serving public schools, inner-city agencies and micro-lending organizations, notably Opportunity International.

One Christmas season family members and I toured the melting facility of Al's steel company. In the midst of the noise and heat I got to overhear his conversations with senior, mainly African-American, workers. He knew all their grandchildren's names, though he could not have been at that particular plant very often in the preceding years.

I said to one forklift driver, "You all seem to take pride in identifying with your CEO!" He: "Well, we have a right to. We helped produce him!" That line symbolized the give-and-take effect of Al.

As I think of Paul and Al I have an image of great oaks having fallen, oaks whose branches and leaves had formed a protective canopy over us. As they go, they leave a great hole in the canopy, a disturbing emptiness between us and the sky, but also a clearing in which others can grow, following their example.