

Living long

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 19, 2000](#) issue

Years ago I wrote about the tendency of modernist, evolution-minded, progressive, pacifist theists to live long lives. Someone once asked Vida Scudder the secret of her longevity. She said that she was a liberal who nurtured many projects, and she had to get up each morning to see how they were doing. I recall the very senior Charles Clayton Morrison, decades-long editor of this magazine, chastising some of us younger editors in the 1950s for including Eastern Orthodoxy in our ecumenical scope and hope. “If you include them, I may not see the day of ecumenical fulfillment,” he said.

Nowadays there are not too many modernist, evolution-minded, progressive, pacifist theists around. But members of another tribe may be enjoying similar longevity. I speak of Lutheran ministers, whose deaths get chronicled in the *Lutheran*. My family called my attention to the April issue, which gives a current accounting.

They had noticed the death of Edgar H. Behrens, who reached 99. Behrens mentored me from 1958 to 1963 as I founded a new congregation five miles away from his suburban parish. He also baptized my son John the month I began writing for this magazine in '56.

Read on, said family members. The next obituary was of Wenzel A. Bloom, 100, followed by those of ten other nonagenarians, who died at 97, 93, 92, 91, 93, 98, 90, 90, 90 and 94. Seven more had been in their 80s. There were a few younger people, but they were greatly outnumbered.

Questions come to mind: Would other denominational magazines—those of the Disciples, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Methodists and the like—similarly testify to the connection between faith and longevity? What about Catholic priests? Has anyone done formal studies on pastors' lifespans? What do actuaries at life insurance companies have to tell us?

As I consider the Lutherans' recently deceased 12, new questions come into play: What did they have in common? Why did they not burn out, which is the thing clergy

do nowadays? Did they shape their ministries before the term and the reality of burnout came into being, and never catch on? Or does ministry remain a good bet for anyone who does not want to buy life insurance? And if Lutheran clerical longevity is a fact, how account for the success of the Aid Association for Lutherans, or Lutheran Brotherhood and other Lutheran-based insurance giants?

Lutherans are thought to be angst-ridden. I carried on a frequent e-mail correspondence with Richard Marius during his own pilgrimage toward death as he was writing *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death* (Harvard University Press). Marius saw Luther as nearly stewing himself into an early death through depression, anxiety and an inordinate fear of the final enemy. I think he got Luther only half right, but that half causes one to wonder how our nonagenarians coped. Were they better Lutherans than Luther? What do we have to learn from them? I hope I have at least two decades left in which to get some answers.