

At Judson Church, Howard Moody was a social justice leader

by [John Dart](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue

During his long ministry at Judson Memorial Church in New York's Greenwich Village, ex-marine Howard Moody led religious assaults on tough social issues of the 1960s, '70s and '80s—openly aiding women seeking abortions, blacks calling for civil rights and people entangled by drug addiction, AIDS or prostitution. He died September 12 in Manhattan at 91 of pneumonia and complications from cancer treatment.

Moody, born in Dallas, was having second thoughts about studying for the ministry at Baylor University in 1941 when he enlisted before Pearl Harbor and served during World War II in the Pacific. When he did return to Baptist ministry, he became a preacher who concentrated on good works for the needy and hosting avant-garde theater groups—a mix that drew large public notice for his small congregation.

“With his marine-style crew cut, one's first impression was not that one was meeting with a pastor/social activist,” said Baptist executive A. Roy Medley, president-elect of the National Council of Churches, calling Moody “a moving force in the social changes that swept America.”

“He was not one to shun controversy in pushing the church to respond to what he felt were the crying needs of the day,” said Medley, who is also general secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA. “Howard's gentle, engaging spirit was his trademark.”

Moody ended his service as a marine sergeant while he was treated for malaria at a base in Santa Barbara, California. There he met his wife of 68 years, Lorraine, at a Baptist church. He earned a degree at the University of California, Santa Barbara. While studying at Yale Divinity School, he was ordained in 1950 at Judson after leading the church's summer youth program. After serving a student chaplaincy at Ohio State University, Moody was called as senior pastor by Judson in 1957.

Moody, who served for 35 years as Judson's senior pastor, was known for his bold push for women's rights, notably in helping women who wanted to end their pregnancies. At the recommendation of another minister in 1957, a Florida woman traveled to New York where Moody secured a safe abortion for her.

A decade later, while abortion was still illegal, Moody cofounded the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, a national network of 21 ministers and rabbis to assist with referrals and present the rationale for change. Writing in *Renewal* magazine, Moody said the law was "an excessive and self-righteous punishment, physically and psychologically, of women." For the latter part of the 20th century, he said, "it is a cruel travesty on equal justice."

Forming that group in 1967, even amid press attention, did not lead to any arrests. When New York State legalized abortion in 1970, Moody helped to form a national network of 1,400 clergy to refer women to places to go for safe abortions in the state. Moody's church formed a nonprofit private clinic. It was kept open even after the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion.

Moody's compassion for women's health extended to prostitutes, who were often denied or ignored by health and medical clinics. With Arlene Carmen, a longtime program associate of Moody's at Judson, he set up a "ministry of presence" for street prostitutes. A Harper book by Moody and Carmen noted that the pastor often drove a small van equipped with seats, free coffee and home-baked cookies. They launched a journal, *The Hooker's Hookup*, and started "an invisible congregation" for counseling, baptizing children and other services.

"In the late '50s, this church worked with heroin addicts—fought for humanization, and picketed for hospital beds so they could be treated as patients rather than criminals," Moody and Carmen wrote. "In the '60s, we befriended and stood with blacks and hippies and people that hated the war. These were not 'our people' or neighbors, but we learned from their lives and their struggles."

With church members in the mid-1960s, Moody ran voter registration drives to sign up minorities. Martin Luther King Jr. had spoken at Judson in 1958. Long active in the New York Civil Liberties Union and in city politics—including battles with Tammany Hall—Moody attended the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago as a delegate. But he reportedly came away disenchanted with the Democrats, not only because of the rioting but also because the party did not strongly condemn the Vietnam War.

In a period when theatrical and artistic experimentation pushed against cultural barriers, Judson Memorial Church was one of the leaders. Moody removed pews and pulpit from the sanctuary to make room for informal or innovative activities. An 18-foot-high cross was removed lest Jewish visitors might be offended. In the 1960s, Yoko Ono and her troupe gave avant-garde performances at Judson. The church became one of the early Off Off Broadway theaters. When Judson hosted an art show that used the American flag to make political statements, Moody was among those arrested by police who cited them for “flag desecration.”

The ultimate success of the artistic experiments, according to a Judson chronicler, was due to Moody’s Baptist tenets: the autonomy of the local church and “soul liberty,” meaning that no one stands between you and God’s revelation.

After his death, Jodi Magee, who leads Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health, wrote in her September 17 blog that she still marvels at the success of Moody’s abortion referral service in the years before *Roe v. Wade*. “When we interviewed him in 2001 for a documentary film, he estimated that, at the service’s top strength, he and 25 colleagues counseled more than a thousand women each week—not to get an abortion, just to get information.” He told Magee, “We were deluged.”