

Feisty civil rights activist Will Campbell dies at 88

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(RNS) The Rev. Will D. Campbell, a Baptist minister and early white civil rights activist, as well as best-selling writer and folksy raconteur, died Monday (June 3) in Nashville, Tenn. He was 88.

With a fiercely independent streak and sometimes prickly personality, Campbell used his powerful way with words to explore American racism, especially the contradiction inherent in Christian support for segregation across the South.

And he had his own contradictions, as well. A Southern Baptist who drank moonshine with the Catholic nuns he counted as his friends, Campbell was an equal-opportunity critic, castigating liberals as well as conservatives in his writing and preaching and storytelling.

His uncompromising theology — that “Mr. Jesus died for the bigots as well” as for their victims — sometimes put him at odds with liberals and some civil rights leaders who worked alongside him.

“If you’re gonna love one, you’ve got to love them all,” Campbell often said, and he became known for preaching to those who opposed integration as well as supporting those who worked to break down racial barriers.

“I always say that Will became the civil rights chaplain for the Ku Klux Klan,” Bernard Lafayette, a Nashville civil rights leader and close friend of Campbell, told the Tennessean.

Beginning in 1962 with “Race and the Renewal of the Church,” Campbell wrote scores of books, including the 1977 National Book Award finalist, “Brother to a Dragonfly,” which is part autobiography, part elegy for his brother and part history of the civil rights movement.

Former President Jimmy Carter, a friend of Campbell, was quoted by the Tennessean as saying, “He used the force of his words and witness of his deeds to convey a healing message of reconciliation to any and all who heard him.”

His prose draws at times from William Faulkner and Mark Twain, even as it retained its own unique voice.

Campbell’s civil rights activism, however, began even before his writing career.

In 1954, Campbell took a job as director of religious life at the University of Mississippi but quit two years later when his support of integration stirred hostility. Campbell then was hired as field director for the National Council of Churches and came into close contact with the organized civil rights movement.

In that position in 1957, Campbell helped escort black students integrating Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., and according to The New York Times, he was the only white person invited by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In 1963, he left the NCC to become director of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, which published the influential journal, “Katallagete,” a Greek word meaning “be reconciled.” It was edited by James Y. Holloway of Berea College.

In addition to his civil rights activism, Campbell also was active in a host of other causes, including opposition to the war in Vietnam and the death penalty, and support of the draft resistance movement.

Like another towering figure of his generation, William Sloane Coffin, who inspired the character of the Rev. Scot Sloan in Garry Trudeau’s “Doonesbury” cartoon, Campbell is the inspiration for cartoonist Doug Marlette’s the Rev. Will B. Dunn in his “Kudzu” comic strip.