

Lesser-known heroes

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [January 7, 2015](#) issue



Ralph Hamburger. Photo by Antonin Ficatier. Photo courtesy of [Princeton Theological Seminary](#).

He has an unpretentious name—Ralph Hamburger. If you heard him say it at a party, you would be tempted to smile and look over his shoulder for someone else to greet. But the name fits him well. There’s nothing about Ralph that pretends.

He grew up in Holland, where his family was part of the resistance movement. They hid Jews. After the war he came to America, received a college education, and attended Princeton Seminary. He was ordained as a Presbyterian pastor and served a congregation here until he could return to Europe, where he spent the rest of his ministry pastoring underground congregations behind the iron curtain. There were very few days when he was not an outlaw, always in danger of being thrown in jail.

His life sounds similar to that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who also left this country to enter the fray of a culture dangerous to his convictions. Everyone is ready to bow a knee at the mention of Bonhoeffer’s name, but precious few of us have heard of Ralph.

I learned about him when his daughter nominated him to receive our seminary’s Distinguished Alumni/ae Award, which we bestowed upon him in October. I will never forget the high honor of surprising the audience with his story. Then I watched this 91-year-old man walk to the podium under thunderous applause to receive our

inadequate award for a life of unpretentious heroism.

At the podium, hunched over toward the microphone, Ralph said a few tender words about his wife, who is confined to an assisted living facility. Then he made us all want to take off our shoes as he described the holiness he found in the dangerous ground upon which he lived his life.

How did we miss such heroism along the way?

One of the things about Ralph's life that makes him distinguished is the reminder that there are many unpretentious, undistinguished pastors in the world who are quietly doing heroic things.

Most of my Sundays are spent on the road as the guest preacher for a congregation. When the worship service is over, the host pastor accompanies me to the doors of the church where people greet us before leaving. For some reason I am always placed ahead of the pastor. When the parishioners get to me they typically say, "Thank you for being with us today," or maybe "That was a lovely sermon." But then they move past me to their pastor and say things like, "Marge's surgery is scheduled for Thursday. I hope you can stop by the hospital to pray for her." They need to believe their pastor believes God is with us.

Pastors spend every day of their ministries behind an iron curtain that is determined to separate us from the splendors of holiness. Those in the pews on Sunday morning have been bullied by the screaming call to succeed in a futile exercise of self-constructing a life that will be fulfilling, whole, or at least not hurt so much. And all the pastor has is a still small voice that suggests there's another way.

Into this dangerous terrain the pastor subversively claims that self-construction only leads to self-destruction. "We have a Creator for our lives who is not done," the pastor keeps saying. "We have a Redeemer for all of the tragedy we have created by acting as if we were gods. We have a Spirit who will not abandon us to the mess we've made of ourselves and the world."

The pastors who say this are mostly just as ordinary as they can be. They are unheralded, ordinary Ralphs who sacrificed the comfortable options to live on the other side of the secular curtain. Instead, they live in beat-up parsonages their churches cannot afford to repair—for the sole purpose of using their lives to say, "Behold."

At the end of long years of service there's a small reception in a church fellowship hall adorned with a few balloons and a hastily hung banner with "Good-bye" scrawled across it. A couple of people say kind words of appreciation. Someone presents a gift and plaque. After the receiving line runs out and the tablecloths are being taken away, the old pastor's spouse whispers that it's time to go.

There were so many middle-of-the-night phone calls that sent the pastor to an emergency room, so many heartbreaking funerals, so many babies held in the pastor's arms as the waters of covenant were placed on another tiny forehead. There were fancy weddings where the pastor fought through anxieties about the dog and pony show to proclaim something about holy covenants, and there were harsh words and conflicts offered as a reward for every effort at leadership. So many times the pastor climbed behind the pulpit to try again to reveal the holiness on the other side of the curtain.

Through all of those unspectacular days the pastor was always a subversive outlaw to a secular society. But for Ralph it ends by quietly heading off to an unimpressive retirement home.

Where is the distinction in such a life? Only heaven knows. That's the good news. Heaven knows.