

Rest in peace, Vincent Harding

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Vincent Harding died yesterday. If all the civil rights leader had done was draft [King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech](#), that would have been quite a contribution. ("I watched this [antipoverty] program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war.") But in the 60s Harding founded Atlanta's Mennonite House (with his wife Rosemarie Freeney Harding), traveled around the South with the movement, and got his doctorate in history (here in Chicago, with *Century* contributing editor Martin Marty). After that he had a long career of teaching (mostly at Iliff), writing, and activism.

Harding was gentle and wise. He could also be rhetorically quite fierce—be sure to read his ["open letter to President Obama"](#) following the killing of Osama bin Laden:

The CNN anchor calls this time of the killing "the president's finest night." Oh, beloved Barack, are the brutalized crowds mocking you when they gather in front of the White House and chant, "USA, yes we can"? Have "we"—you and us—now created a more just and compassionate nation, a more perfect union? Have "we"—you and us—contributed to the building of a new world that takes us beyond the ancient, bloody goals of retribution, of killing for killing, of destroying our enemies?

He gave some great interviews late in his life, especially last year, a big year for civil rights 50th anniversaries. Here's Harding on *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*:

And on *On Being*:

And on the Iconocast, the *Jesus Radicals* podcast:

"You can't start a movement," Harding said, "but you can prepare for one." That's as good a slogan for faith-based activism as I've heard. Harding was a giant of a disciple, a leader but first a follower of Jesus. We'll miss him.