

Loren Mead, founder of the Alban Institute, dies at age 88

The author of *The Once and Future Church* was part of the shift to looking at congregations in their contexts—not just the church in general.

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue



Loren Mead. Photo courtesy of the family of Loren Mead.

Loren Mead, an author and educator who founded the Alban Institute, died at age 88 on May 5. His family wrote that he “died peacefully under hospice care at his home” in Falls Church, Virginia.

He authored articles and books, most notably *The Once and Future Church* (1991). In that book, as [a *Christian Century* editorial](#) described it, he “declared that the era of ‘Christendom’ was over for mainline Protestants. Mead launched a discussion—which has only expanded since—about an emerging new paradigm of church life defined by local context and intentional, grassroots mission.”

Mead, an Episcopal priest, began career in parish ministry. After receiving his M.Div. degree from Virginia Theological Seminary in 1955, he served churches in North

Carolina, South Carolina, and the United Kingdom.

“Born and raised in the segregated South, Loren worked for racial justice and reconciliation throughout his career,” his family wrote in his obituary. “Besides marching with a delegation of white pastors in support of Martin Luther King after the death of [Medgar Evers](#), he played a leading role in the desegregation of Chapel Hill.”

In 1974 Mead founded the Alban Institute, an ecumenical effort in continuing education for pastors that applied insights from the field of organizational development to the study of congregations. Mead worked with organizations, seminaries, and church agencies around the world, including in Australia, Germany, and South Africa.

The Alban Institute [closed in 2014 for financial reasons](#), but its research and consulting work continues as Alban at Duke Divinity.

In a 1994 interview with the *Christian Century* shortly after stepping down as Alban’s president, Mead reflected on his work, for example equipping pastors and other leaders in conflict transformation.

“Conflict used to be something that would explode like a volcano in a congregation, with no sense that anything could be done,” he said. “If you read the future in terms of diversity, then you should realize that conflict is the name of diversity.”

He looked back to the late 1960s and the change in looking at local churches.

“When I started,” he said, “nobody talked about congregations—people talked about the church. I think of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*. That could have been written without knowing there was such a thing as a congregation.”

Congregations remain central for the faithful despite their flaws, he said.

“I grew up in a church in which nobody believed that black people and white people ought to be in the same church or community,” he said. “But sitting in those pews I learned that we should be. The point is that the message is larger than the medium. And messages continue to go through our congregations that are greater than the people in the congregations are aware of.”

Mead's assistance to congregations was not limited to Protestant Christianity. Jeffrey K. Salkin, a rabbi in Florida, [wrote in a commentary](#) about discovering Mead and the Alban Institute while a doctoral student at Princeton Theological Seminary. Salkin especially praised Mead for highlighting the idea of interim leaders to attend to congregational grief and renewal.

Salkin wrote, "We can never know how many religious institutions—churches, synagogues, perhaps even mosques and other sacred communities—are better today because of what he quietly and powerfully taught."

A version of this article, which was edited on May 22, appears in the print edition under the title "People: Loren Mead." Logged-in magazine subscribers can search for articles from before 1998 via the EBSCOhost platform on [our archives page](#), found on the left side after scrolling down.