

Rena Weller Karefa-Smart, international ecumenical leader, dies at age 97

She was the first black woman to graduate from Yale Divinity School, to receive a doctorate in theology from Harvard Divinity School, and to receive tenure at Howard Divinity School.

People in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue



Yale Divinity School dean Greg Sterling (left) presents Rena Weller Karefa-Smart (right) with the Lux et Veritas award in 2017. Yale Divinity School.

Rena Weller Karefa-Smart, global ecumenical leader and scholar, died January 9 at age 97.

“She was a champion for global ecumenism over the course of a long and distinguished career,” the World Council of Churches noted in a tribute. “One of her proudest achievements was becoming a living symbol of ecumenism with her joint ordination as an African Methodist Episcopal Zion minister and Episcopal priest.”

[Karefa-Smart](#) was a consultant for the WCC’s first assembly in 1948 and authored the liturgies for the second in 1954.

Her husband of 62 years, John Karefa-Smart, who died in 2010, was a United Methodist elder. He served in the government of Sierra Leone as the first foreign minister, a member of parliament, and a presidential candidate; she helped organize the women's movement in the country. The couple wrote a book, *The Halting Kingdom: Christianity and the African Revolution* (1959).

She was a pioneering leader in the World Student Christian Federation and served in Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe. She was the first black woman to receive a doctorate in theology from Harvard Divinity School and the first black woman to become a tenured professor at Howard Divinity School, where she taught Christian ethics.

In 1945, she had been the first black woman to graduate from Yale Divinity School. In 2017 the school gave her its Lux et Veritas award.

"When I think of the people I've known along my long life in theological education, I couldn't honestly say that I deserve a place in it," she said on that occasion.

"However when I'm told I do have a place, it gives me a second life. . . . to know that I've not been forgotten." —*Christian Century* staff

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "People: Rena Weller Karefa-Smart."