

United Methodist civil rights activist Gil Caldwell dies at 86

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [October 7, 2020](#) issue



(RNS Photo / Travis Long)

Gil Caldwell, a civil rights activist who later in life stood up for gay rights in the United Methodist Church, died September 4 at the age of 86.

The native of Greensboro, North Carolina, struggled with cancer, his son said on Twitter. The United Methodist News Service reported he had been in hospice care in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

As a student at Boston University's school of theology, Caldwell worked with Martin Luther King Jr., who led him to rally for jobs at the 1963 March on Washington and for voting rights in the Selma to Montgomery march in Alabama. Caldwell also protested against school segregation in Boston.

A former associate general secretary of the church's General Commission on Religion and Race, Caldwell lived long enough to see his church move beyond having a segregated central jurisdiction of Black churches. He continued his work as a "gay rights ally-activist" in his last years.

"What an irony that we've worked at racial integration and now persons who are same gender loving are viewed as second class and outside the framework of the church," he told Religion News Service in 2015.

Along with gay members of his denomination, he was arrested after disrupting the quadrennial general conference in 2000. He described officiating at the wedding of two Black gay men about 15 years later as "a beautiful ceremony that I will always remember." In recent years, Caldwell toured the country with Marilyn Bennett, with whom he coproduced the documentary *From Selma to Stonewall: Are We There Yet?*

On June 7, Caldwell was still publicly demonstrating his activism, appearing at a Black Lives Matter rally in Willingboro, New Jersey. When he spoke, he said he was encouraged by its multiracial attendance, according to the UMNS report on the rally.

"I will not get to the promised land with my Black family and those who are our allies," he said. "But they, if they keep these moments alive, [may find] a semblance of MLK's beloved community will be visible." —Religion News Service