

Groundbreaking Lutheran educator Cheryl Stewart Pero dies at 69

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Cheryl Stewart Pero, one of the first Black Lutheran women to be ordained in the United States, died on October 28 after a short illness and hospitalization. She was 69.

In 1980, Pero became the second Black woman ordained in the Lutheran Church in America, a predecessor body of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. She was also the first Black woman to receive a PhD in biblical studies, which she earned at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

She later went on to teach a popular course in multicultural biblical interpretation at the seminary, earning a reputation for hospitality and deep care for her students.

In the 1980s, Pero and other ELCA teaching theologians of African descent developed the Conference of International Black Lutheran, an organization which she said aided her as much as she aided it. Pero represented CIBL as a longtime leader at the ELCA Theological Roundtable, which is convened by the office of the presiding bishop.

Pero also worked with her late husband, Albert, to form and lead the Albert “Pete” Pero, Jr. Multicultural Center at LSTC. She retired as head of the center in 2017.

Many members of the ELCA would recognize Pero’s name from her significant contributions to *Luther’s Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections*. She also wrote a reflection about her journey as a leader in the church for *Living Lutheran* in the magazine’s We Are Church, We Are Called series.

“If it wasn’t for Cheryl, who mentored so many, I would not be the sole African American Lutheran woman teaching theologian in any of our seminaries,” said Beverly Wallace, associate professor of congregation and community care at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. “In honor of Dr. Cheryl Angela Stewart Pero, the work of a womanist initiative will go forth.”

“Mama Cheryl was a part of my seminary, pastoral, and theological journey for over ten years,” said Kwame Pitts, pastor of Crossroads Lutheran Church in Amherst, New York. “She is what an elder and mentor should be. Not too many people can say they have a deep love for their professors, but I do love her and will continue to honor her. That’s my responsibility as a practical womanist theologian.” —Jocelyn Fuller, *Living Lutheran*, and Dawn Araujo-Hawkins.

*A version of this article originally appeared in Living Lutheran.*