

Longest serving UMC bishop dies at 93

by [Heather Hahn](#) in the [August 11, 2021](#) issue



(File photo by Mike DuBose, United Methodist News)

United Methodist bishop Joseph H. Yeakel died July 4 at age 93. At the time of his death, Yeakel had been a United Methodist bishop longer than any episcopal leader still living.

In his more than 70 years of ministry, he led the church through a time of significant transition. As head of the Evangelical United Brethren's Board of Evangelism, he supported the EUB-Methodist union to form the United Methodist Church.

As a UMC bishop, Yeakel quickly developed a reputation as an expert on the Book of Discipline, the denomination's policy book, and on church parliamentary procedure.

Yeakel took on roles that required presiding skills. He served as president of the General Council on Finance and Administration and twice as president of the Board of Church and Society, the denomination's social witness agency. His bishop colleagues elected him to serve as Council of Bishops president in 1992-1993.

"There was never any instance when I saw him unprepared in advance, or incapable of meeting the need and responsibility that his leadership alone could supply," said Wilson Shearer, his friend of 68 years and a fellow pastor in the former Evangelical United Brethren Church. "Of course, he made some mistakes along the way, but he learned from them."

During his ministry, Yeakel saw the advancement of some of the first women with full clergy status as well as efforts to dismantle the Methodist Church's racial segregation. Friends say he became a champion of both female clergy and racial justice.

Yeakel's views evolved in another way. While a stickler for following the Book of Discipline, he came to believe that the church should end the ban on ordaining "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy. In 1996, he was among 15 bishops who signed a statement making that case.

In 2011, he was among 33 retired bishops who released a statement urging an end to the clergy ban. —United Methodist News