

Influential Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong dies at 90

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [October 10, 2021](#) issue



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John Shelby Spong, an Episcopal bishop and a best-selling author known for his progressive theology and his support of LGBTQ clergy, has died. He was 90.

Spong made headlines as bishop of the Diocese of Newark, where he served for more than two decades and in 1989 ordained the first openly gay male priest in the Episcopal Church. He also championed female clergy, requiring churches in his diocese to include at least one female candidate in each search process.

Author of more than a dozen books, Spong had a knack for communicating complex theology to lay readers, said Kelly Hughes, a longtime book publicist specializing in religious thought. Hughes worked with Spong on a number of books, including *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*, Spong's breakout book in the late 1980s, and *The Sins of Scripture*.

A pastor at heart, Spong would spend time talking with people during book tours and making them feel seen and welcomed, said Hughes. He also connected with readers who were Christian but "did not want to check their brain at the door," as Spong often put it.

"We're space-age people," he said in a 2013 interview. "The world the Christian church was born in is not the world we live in, and if you confine it to the world it was born in, Christianity will die, because that world is dying." —Religion News Service