

Ron Sider's deep faith

## **The Evangelicals for Social Action founder is remembered for living the gospel he professed.**

by [Elizabeth Eisenstadt Evans](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue



Courtesy of Eastern University

An advocate for faith expressed in action. A White, male evangelical who embraced the voices of the marginalized and made abundant room in leadership for new generations and for people of color. A champion for peacemaking both when wars were popular and when they were unpopular. A scholar who didn't flee to the suburbs but raised his family in one of Philadelphia's less privileged zip codes.

The consensus of many friends and former colleagues is that Ron Sider, who died July 27 at age 82, lived what he professed. The founder of Evangelicals for Social Action (now Christians for Social Action) and professor of theology and public policy at Eastern University was one of the most prominent public faces of a progressive evangelical movement that saw no daylight between evangelism and justice.

"Ron was one of those unique people whose words, actions, and character were all consistent," said Heidi Unruh, who worked with Sider both at Evangelicals for Social

Action—an organization, now called Christians for Social Action, which Sider founded in 1978—and as a co-author and speaker.

“Ron never compromised his theological beliefs,” said Tony Campolo, professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University in Philadelphia. The two became friends when the Sider family moved into a largely Black, economically disadvantaged section of the city.

“It wasn’t just an academic perception of the Bible. It was living out his beliefs [in a way] that became a model for many of us,” Campolo said.

Raised in a Canadian Brethren in Christ family, Sider was one of the authors of the 1973 “Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern,” which called for rejecting economic materialism, inequality, militarism, and sexism.

At the time, said Philadelphia-based activist and author Shane Claiborne, there were lots of people doing justice work. It just wasn’t rooted in faith in scripture. “I think that’s where Ron was really unique,” said Claiborne. “He was primarily motivated by his faith and deeply grounded in scripture,” enabling him to have an impact among Christians who saw the New Testament Jesus as their primary authority.

A prodigious writer, Sider authored or co-authored more than 30 books. His 1977 book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* has gone through six editions since its publication, influencing generations of readers. Late in life, Sider remained engaged in public dialogue, including on his blog, as he underwent treatment for cancer.

“I think he was really someone that wanted to redeem and rehabilitate what evangelicalism is and what the movement stands for,” said Adam Russell Taylor, president of the Christian advocacy group Sojourners. “It pained him that it became so hijacked by an ideological agenda and a religious right [agenda] that ultimately became a kind of commitment to Trumpism.”

According to Asbury University historian David R. Swartz, Sider’s concern for social justice was rooted in the Anabaptist, rural, Canadian identities of his younger years. In his book *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism*, Swartz outlines how Sider helped launch the Evangelical Environmental Network, which in the early 1990s raised \$1 million to give to efforts to preserve the Endangered Species Act. Later, EEN launched a high-profile What Would Jesus Drive? campaign that urged Christians to think about their car’s fuel consumption.

Sider seemed to have a knack for creating an environment in which innovative programs aimed at remediating some of America's thorniest social problems could flourish. He did this for a half century.

Others credit Sider with helping to create change that was less obvious but more pervasive.

"People used to ask questions about church programs like, Is it okay to have food pantries? Should we have a clothes closet?" said Nikki Toyama-Szeto, executive director of Christians for Social Action. "In the majority of circles, that's a non-question anymore. You can draw a dotted line back to some of those times of clarity and conviction that came from that Chicago declaration."

Sider always had a global perspective, said Al Tizon, a former ESA president who is now executive director of international ministries for the Evangelical Covenant Church and a professor at North Park Theological Seminary. Sider and his colleagues had a power that came precisely from speaking from the margins, he said.

While it's not easy to be a prophetic voice, said Toyama-Szeto, Sider wasn't one of the grumpy ones. "He did hold out hope," she said, "and his hope was really rooted in the goodness of God."

Politically, Sider was hard to pigeonhole. (He apparently liked it that way.) A proponent of what he described as a "consistently pro-life ethic," Sider advocated for nonviolent conflict resolution, opposed militarism, and believed in being pro-life "from womb to tomb," recalled Claiborne. "I really do think of Ron as a friend of Jesus, who loved Jesus so deeply. That's what made him a champion for life."

Sider remained opposed to marriage equality throughout his life. That said, he did support the creation of [Oriented to Love](#), a CSA program that encourages thoughtful dialogue between LGBTQ Christians and others.

"He understood the sin of the church that has excluded LGBTQ people," said Tizon, who was present when the program was created. He believed that "we've got to figure out how to love each other."

What will Sider's friends and colleagues miss the most?

His ability to learn deeply from "the margins and the global church," said Toyama-Szeto. "It's this expansive, global Christian community in which God reveals Godself.

A White man working with members of the international community and those who were marginalized—he didn't do it in a condescending way," she said. "I think he was eager . . . to learn."

"I miss his voice in the world," said Unruh. "There was something so distinctive about the way he thought, so trustworthy about the way he wrote and spoke."

Sarah Withrow King, a former deputy director of Eastern University's Sider Center who now directs the animal rights organization CreatureKind, echoed this assessment. "I think old White guys get this reputation for being rigid and judgmental and stuck in their ways. But Ron was always willing to listen."

Claiborne said he would miss "that spiritual grounding" of Sider's "that is not at all afraid of doubts and questions but that really, unashamedly, can name the things that are true."

Ben Lowe co-founded Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, which emerged from EEN, and is a former co-chair of the CSA board. While Sider is often called a leading light of the evangelical left, Lowe thinks that categorization misses the heart of Sider's legacy.

"In my experience, it was never about the left or the right with Ron, whether theologically or politically," he said. "Rather, it was about following the Jesus of the Bible, faithfully and completely—wherever that led and whatever the cost. His lasting impact on me is the great blessing to have seen and known someone of humble and childlike faith, who loved Jesus, lived for Jesus, and hoped in Jesus, and is now forever with Jesus."

As Campolo mused about Sider's legacy, a telephone conversation they had—the last one before Sider's death—came back to him, and he repeated the words Sider told him. "If Christ is not risen from the dead, nothing else matters. If Christ is risen from the dead, nothing else matters."

Write it down, Sider said to his old friend.