

Former theology dean Walter Muelder dies: Dedicated to global ecumenism and racial equality

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Walter G. Muelder, dean of the Boston University School of Theology from 1945 to 1972, died of a heart attack on June 12 at age 97. Noted for his dedication to global ecumenism and racial equality in the post-World War II decades, Muelder continued to impress United Methodist colleagues even in his last week with his engagement in current issues.

Three days before his death, Muelder told a retirees' lunch at his Methodist regional conference that "we retired ministers have an ongoing role to play in the conflicts, such as those on homosexuality, which threatened to split the church at the last General Conference [that ended one month earlier in Pittsburgh]."

As quoted by his friend Thom Gallen, Muelder believed that the church can be held together by reminding members "to think comprehensively and holistically about these questions"—a reference to Methodism's fourfold basis for taking authoritative positions, namely scripture, tradition, reason and experience. "No literal appeal to isolated scripture passages is sufficient," Muelder said.

The Illinois-born Muelder earned his doctorate at Boston University's School of Theology in 1933. After serving as a pastor in the Midwest and teaching at Berea College, he returned to the Boston seminary where he attracted faculty and students interested in practical theology and social ethics.

Due in part to Muelder's efforts, more than half of the doctorates in religion awarded to African Americans in the U.S. between 1953 and 1968 were awarded by Boston University. Among the recipients was Martin Luther King Jr., who credited Muelder as a significant influence on his nonviolent civil rights leadership. Muelder also served the World Council of Churches many years, and attended its assemblies in 1954, 1961 and 1968.