

Theologian-bioethicist J. Robert Nelson dies: A leading ecumenist

News in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

John Robert Nelson, a pioneering proponent of church unity who was later prominent for his theological contributions to biomedical ethics, died July 6 at a Houston hospital of cancer and complications. He was 84.

Nelson, a Methodist, should be listed among the top U.S. ecumenists of the last half-century, said Martin E. Marty, professor emeritus at the University of Chicago. After being present at the first World Council of Churches General Assembly in 1948 and studying theology in Europe, Nelson became the program executive for the WCC's Faith and Order Commission in 1953 and articulated the ecumenical vision in several books.

"If the ecumenical movement in that form is not the center of excitement now, this is largely because of what it achieved: it brought about unimaginable differences in interchurch relations, off which we now live and many take for granted," said Marty, an editor at the Century, which often published articles by Nelson during his longtime tenure as one of its editors-at-large.

While dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School from 1957 to 1960, Nelson assembled an outstanding faculty and was active in desegregation efforts in Nashville. Nelson resigned in protest in 1960 after student activist James Lawson, later to become a leading Methodist pastor and an honored alumnus, was expelled in connection with civil rights protests.

When rapid advances in molecular biology and biotechnology raised new issues in the 1970s, Nelson entered the developing field of bioethics. He offered theological arguments for the value of research but also helped religious professionals evaluate moral debates associated with abortion, in vitro fertilization and euthanasia. He worked with panels created by the National Institutes of Health to produce ethical guidelines on cloning of genes and their uses in research and agriculture.

Drawing on his work from 1985 to 1995 as director of the Institute of Religion at the Texas Medical Center in Houston, Nelson organized conferences to train clergy and others in medical technologies affecting patient care. His books include *One Lord, One Church* (1958), *Overcoming Church Divisions* (1962), *Science and Our Troubled Conscience* (1980) and *On the New Frontiers of Genetics and Religion* (1994).