

Memorial Resolution: J. Robert Wright

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In the year of his death, the Task Force to Coordinate Ecumenical and Interfaith Work commends the life and work of J. Robert Wright and unanimously honors his contribution to The Episcopal Church and the Ecumenical Movement. His obituary, prepared and written by the Rt. Rev. William Franklin, is below.

J. Robert Wright, A Bridge Between Faiths, Dies at 85

The Rev. Canon J. Robert Wright, the leading Episcopal Church theologian, strategist, and ambassador in the movement to unite the Christian Churches, the Ecumenical Movement, died at his home in Manhattan in the late afternoon of January 12, 2022, with his caregivers present. His death was announced by the Very Rev. Michael DeLashmutt, the Acting Dean and President of the General Theological Seminary in New York City, where Canon Wright had taught for forty-four years. Dean DeLashmutt said that Canon Wright was reading a book in his chair, fell asleep, and passed away quietly.

From the late nineteenth century, the U.S. Episcopal Church has been a significant leader of the Ecumenical Movement. The second half of the twentieth century was a golden age of progress towards the unity of the Churches, with the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, made up of the Anglican, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox Churches and expanded with the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into the Ecumenical Movement at the Second Vatican Council of the 1960's.

The goal of this movement is "full communion," a concrete, visual realization of the communion among people of faith through the full interchange and sharing of the sacraments, baptism and holy communion, as well as the common sharing of ordained ministers and priests across denominational boundaries.

That is the real goal of the Ecumenical Movement, and it is to this goal that J. Robert Wright dedicated his life, labor, and scholarship.

Canon Wright's primary role was as a behind the scenes advisor to the Presiding Bishops of the Episcopal Church, as the theological consultant to the Episcopal Church Ecumenical Office from 1982 into the twenty-first century, and through the sharing of his of his theological and historical scholarship with the leaders of the Episcopal and other Anglican Communion Churches, and as an official representative of the Episcopal Church in negotiating full communion agreements, and in navigating encounters with world Christian leaders, all of which made the Episcopal Church increasingly a more active partner in the world community of Christian believers.

He served as a spokesman to the press. Since 1972 *The New York Times* has cited J. Robert Wright eleven times, mostly on ecumenical matters.

The Most Reverend Frank T. Griswold, the 25th Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church said on hearing of his death: "Father Wright's ecumenism included a profound knowledge of and warm relations with the Churches of the East. His presence and wise counsel during my visits to the Patriarchs of Constantinople, Moscow, and the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church, helped to make them much more than a state visit but true occasions of fraternal encounter and exchange."

In 2008 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, awarded Canon Wright the Archbishop of Canterbury's Cross of St. Augustine, honoring his role as advisor and guide to many archbishops and bishops throughout the world-wide Anglican Communion.

And yet there was a side to this role that was not glamorous at all: long weekends spent in conference centers, with bad food and tedious negotiations hammering out agreements on fine points of theology that might lead to full communion. There were great successes in achieving goals of unity, but also setbacks and disappointments on the road to unity.

Canon Wright was particularly interested in the official dialogues of the Episcopal Church with the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He was a member of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States from 1971. Canon Wright represented the Episcopal Church and the whole Anglican Communion on the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission from 1983-1991. He was a member of the Anglican-Eastern Orthodox Consultation in the United States from 1972.

However, when the ordination of women as priests and bishops was officially authorized by the Episcopal Church in 1976, a move Canon Wright vigorously supported, and then when Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold consecrated the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church in 2003 and the Episcopal Church in 2018 authorized a liturgy for same-gender weddings, progress toward full communion with Roman Catholics and the Orthodox Churches came to a halt.

And yet Canon Wright's ambassadorial mission to these two Church bodies did not come to an end. His gift for friendship and hospitality aimed at maintaining relations with these two Church bodies did not wither.

For example, he maintained a close personal friendship with Edward Egan, the Cardinal Archbishop of New York from 2000-2009. Their close friendship began when the Cardinal, then a priest, served as Secretary of the New York Archdiocesan Commission on Ecumenism. Once, when Canon Wright broke his ankle, with one call to Cardinal Egan, Wright was sent to Catholic Rehabilitation of New York City, and he was given the Cardinal's suite for his recovery stay.

When Cardinal Egan hosted Pope Benedict XVI in New York in 2008, the Cardinal made it possible for the Pope to honor Canon Wright with a papal pontifical medal.

Canon Wright maintained equally close ties with the Orthodox Churches. When a tragic fire defaced the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral of St. Sava in Manhattan in 2016, Canon Wright joined the fund-raising campaign and he helped out to restore the Cathedral. It had once been an Episcopal Church until 1943, a Chapel of Trinity Church Wall Street, and then it passed to the Serbian Orthodox Church.

For such gestures Canon Wright was awarded the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchal cross, and four other Patriarchal crosses from the heads of Orthodox Churches. He was named Honorary Vartabed or "Teacher of the Armenian Church." On his many trips to the Holy Land, to meet with such Orthodox prelates, he became known as a shrewd barterer for ancient coins and antique rugs in the Jerusalem marketplace.

Of all of J. Robert Wright's contributions to the Ecumenical Movement, none has been more significant than his path-breaking work in Anglican-Lutheran relations: the achievement of full communion between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Wright was the principal Episcopalian architect and drafter of *Called to Common Mission* (1999) which allowed the two Churches to declare officially full communion at a joint service at the Washington National Cathedral on January 6, 2001. Theologian Michael Root has said that full communion between the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America would not have come to pass without J. Robert Wright's "unflagging commitment."

BACKGROUND AND EDUCATION

J. Robert Wright was born in Carbondale, Illinois, on October 20, 1936. This was basketball country, and he was so schooled in the game from an early age that he served as the basketball coach of the General Theological Seminary "Penguins" basketball team for forty-four years.

He received his B. A. in 1958 from the University of the South, Sewanee, his M.Div. from the General Theological Seminary in 1963, and his D.Phil. from Oxford University in 1967.

HIS SCHOLARSHIP AND WIDE RECOGNITION

From 1966 to 1968 he was Instructor in Church History at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And then from 1968 to 2012 he served as the longest-tenured faculty member at the General Theological Seminary, on his retirement in 2012 being granted the title of St. Mark's Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Emeritus, in recognition of his stature as a revered teacher at the Seminary.

Canon Wright's accomplishments spanned a number of academic disciplines: patristic and medieval English church history, liturgics, Anglican ecumenical studies, and Eastern Orthodoxy. He was the author of two scholarly monographs, and he was the editor of fourteen additional books. In 2006 a festschrift was published to honor his academic and ecumenical achievements. It is *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism: Studies in Christian Ecclesiality and Ecumenism in Honor of J. Robert Wright* (William B. Eerdman, 2006).

In 2000 Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold named him "Historiographer of the Episcopal Church." He was awarded five honorary degrees, including one by the General Theological Seminary in 2010. In 1990 he was appointed as Honorary Theologian to the Bishop of New York.

A public thanksgiving service for his life will be scheduled by the General Theological Seminary later in the spring of 2022, and held at the Seminary's Chapel of the Good Shepherd. His ashes will be interred in the Columbarium of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, in New York City.

Canon Wright's reflections on and sharing with others the complex yet noble character of the Episcopal Church, the remarkable way in which he combined American, Anglican, and catholic Christianity, will beckon forward a new generation of ecumenists on a sure path that will be a work of time, of friendship, and a work of scholarship, not headlines.