



Paul E. Irion

February 7, 2021

Rev. Dr. Paul E. Irion, 98, of Willow Valley Communities, formerly of Kready Avenue, Millersville, PA, passed away peacefully on February 7, 2021. Born in Akron, Ohio on July 15, 1922, he was the son of the late Rev. Ernst and Elsie Schergens Irion and the husband of the late Mary Jean McElfresh Irion, who passed away in October 2019.

Growing up in Elyria, Ohio, he met Mary Jean in high school and they were married on August 29, 1944. He was a graduate of Elmhurst College in Illinois, Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, and the University of Chicago Divinity School. He did post graduate study at Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

Ordained into the ministry of the United Church of Christ in 1945, he served as Pastor of Bethany United Church of Christ in Tioga, Illinois, and Long Grove Community Church in suburban Chicago. He was the first chaplain of Deaconess Hospital in St. Louis. For 27 years, Paul taught Pastoral Theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary, retiring in 1987. Paul specialized in the study of death, bereavement and grief, lecturing widely in seminaries and colleges across the country. His six books and numerous articles in the field of bereavement and grief focused on the ritual responses to loss, the theological, psychological, and social ways in which communities deal with death. He recently published an avocational novel about 19th century immigrants.

Paul was honored by the Association for Death Education and Counseling for his pioneering work in that area, having published his first book on the subject in 1954. Elmhurst College gave him the Alumni Merit Award, and he was honored by the National Center for Death Education as a Distinguished Contributor to the Field of Dying and Bereavement. In addition to serving on various councils of the United Church of Christ, Paul had been President of the Board of Family and Children's Service in Lancaster and served on the Board of The Samaritan Center. Paul's work with hospice was particularly meaningful to him, and was founding president of Hospice of Lancaster County (now Hospice and Community Care). An advocate for social justice and civil rights, Paul participated in the 1963 March on Washington, and two years later, the Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights. In Lancaster, he served on the city's first Human Relations Committee and Fair Housing Committee.

Mary Jean and Paul spent summers with their family at their home at Chautauqua Institution, a cultural and educational center in New York State, where Paul served on the Board and as Chairperson. Interment will take place at Chautauqua Cemetery.

Paul will be lovingly missed by his son, Mark (Elizabeth); three grandchildren, Marc (Melissa), Michael, and Melissa Markley (Christopher Pratt); four great-grandchildren Stephen, Christopher, Mila and Henry; and two great-great grandchildren, Jack and Evangeline. He is preceded in death by his daughter, Lisa, and sister, Ruth.

A private service will be live streamed from the Lancaster Theological Seminary on April 28, 2021, with Rev. Kathryn L. Kuhn and Loyde Hartley officiating. Please use the following Tribucast link to view the service: <https://client.tribucast.com/tcid/99467190>

The Order of Service can be found in the "photos & videos" tab marked "Order of Service Bulletin".

Memorial contributions may be made in Paul's name to the Lancaster Theological Seminary <https://www.lancasterseminary.edu/give/ways-to-give/> or to Hospice and Community Care <https://www.hospiceconnect.org/give> in Lancaster, PA.

Tribute Wall



“ *The Groffs Family Funeral and Cremation Services Inc. created a Tribute Video in memory of Paul E. Irion*



The Groffs Family Funeral and Cremation Services Inc - April 28, 2021 at 10:29 AM

“ <https://www.lancasterseminary.edu/news/lancaster-seminary-remembers-professor-emeritus-paul-irion/>

*Lancaster Seminary Remembers Professor Emeritus Paul Irion
February 10, 2021*

Internationally Renowned Author on End-of-Life Ministry Dies at 98

Lancaster Seminary Remembers Professor Emeritus Paul Irion

Lancaster Theological Seminary Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Theology, the Rev. Dr. Paul E. Irion, who died Sunday, Feb. 7, 2021, at the age of 98, was an early champion of hospice care and an internationally recognized author of numerous books and articles on death and dying.

A revered professor who taught for 28 years (1959-1987) at Lancaster Theological Seminary, Dr. Irion educated generations of clergy and pastoral counselors.

Dr. Irion was known at Lancaster Seminary for combining his love for students with his passions for social justice, end-of-life ministry, and pastoral ministry.

“He was a seminal thinker who contributed to the consolidation of pastoral theology when the young discipline was developing its own distinctive identity in seminary curricula,” said Lee C. Barrett, Ph.D., Professor of Systematic Theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary.

Early in his career, Dr. Irion championed the hospice care movement, and, in 1980, he was instrumental in the founding of what was then known as Hospice of Lancaster County. Throughout his life, he remained active in promoting and interpreting the mission of hospice.

According to Professor Barrett, “Dr. Irion’s teaching at Lancaster Seminary emphasized the psychological and spiritual dimensions of death and dying, as did his numerous publications, including Hospice and Ministry. His work in this area is still frequently cited.”

A student of Dr. Irion’s, the Rev. Leonard S. Knighton, Lancaster Seminary Class of 1987, said, “His books on the funeral were invaluable and continue to have a place in my library. His influence and his creative dignity continue to inspire and guide us.”

In 2020, Dr. Irion celebrated the 75th anniversary of his ordination as a minister in the United Church of Christ.

Dr. Irion also was an ardent supporter of the civil rights movement. He marched with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1963 March on Washington 1963 and on the historic Selma-to-Montgomery march for voting rights in 1965.

“Rev. Dr. Paul Irion modeled the grace of Christ in all areas of his life,” said the Rev. Kathryn L. Kuhn, Senior Pastor of Church of the Apostles, Lancaster. “A fierce advocate for justice and a soft-spoken man, he holds a place in my heart with his words of wisdom and encouragement.”

Dr. Irion’s expansive interests ranged far beyond the intersections of theology and pastoral care. He and his wife Mary Jean, a well-known poet and essayist who died in 2019, were leading participants in the New York-based Society for Arts, Religion, and Culture, an interdisciplinary think-tank inspired by the philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich.

Loyde Hartley, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Religion and Society, said that Dr. Irion left detailed instructions for his funeral which will conclude with a favorite prayer: “O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, Lord, in thy mercy, grant us a safe

lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen.”

Dr. Irion died peacefully after a short illness under the compassionate watch of a granddaughter. Our prayers and sympathy are with Dr. Irion’s family during this time of loss. Arrangements are pending.

Melissa Markley - April 04, 2025 at 02:57 PM

MM

“*Paul Irion was my professor of Pastoral Theology and a long time friend. I was always moved by dignity adorned with a sense of humor and his scholarship always in the interest of practicing pastors and chaplains. Paul also had a deep concern about social justice, marching with Martin Luther King. About 6 or so years ago I was privileged to share on a Lancaster Seminary panel with him as he eloquently recounted the work of justice, past and present (photos below).*

Recently I read one of his poems about dealing with the death of those we care about most. I was particularly moved the last lines:

"Life can be the same with the loss of a trinket; But never after the loss of a treasure". As a grateful student and friend, these words voice my sentiment.

*Nathan D. Baxter
Retired Episcopal Bishop
Former Dean, Washington National Cathedral*



Melissa Markley - April 04, 2025 at 02:11 PM



“ Paul E. Irion

October 22, 2023 at 11:34 PM



“ The service was uplifting. I join you in mourning this extraordinary seminary professor, community leader, and family man. May you have “the peace that passes all understanding. “. Carol Lytch, President Emerita of Lancaster Theological Seminary.

Carol Lytch - April 29, 2021 at 03:17 PM



“ 1 file added to the album Order of Service Bulletin



The Groffs Family Funeral and Cremation Services Inc - April 27, 2021 at 06:39 PM



“ 1 file added to the album Cover Page - Order of Service



The Groffs Family Funeral and Cremation Services Inc - April 27, 2021 at 06:39 PM

DH

“ I will never forget the gracious welcome that Paul and Mary Jean gave David and me when we joined the faculty at Lancaster Theological Seminary for a joint position in Hebrew Bible in 1980. I looked upon Paul as the Seminary's elder statesman. His office was right next door to mine and I loved hearing his wise chuckle. When David and I went for a one semester sabbatical to Israel and the West Bank, he offered to manage our bank account and pay our bills while we were away (this was long before electronic banking). His caring, warmth, and wisdom helped to make the Seminary the special place that I miss still.
Rest in peace Paul. Well done, good and faithful servant.
Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, Ph.D.

Denise Hopkins - March 31, 2021 at 02:26 PM

PS

“ I enjoyed speaking with Paul by phone when he was in health care. I would often call him after viewing a news report or Penn State football game that I knew he would have been watching. We would discuss the issues and agree on our assessments of the reports. I valued his wisdom.

Pat Strub

Patricia Shuster Strub - February 20, 2021 at 10:28 AM

MM

Thank you, Pat. You were so kind to make sure he had books from the library to read. He enjoyed your friendship, too. The four of you were great friends!

Melissa Markley - February 23, 2021 at 10:29 AM

JD

“ Paul and Mary Jean welcomed my wife Kristin Kovacic and I and our children to their home in Chautauqua year after year with warmth, generosity, and kindness. Kristin and I both worked at the Writer's Center with Mary Jean, but Paul was always involved. I always admired his continued interest in and knowledge about the world, and how active he always was, even as he and Mary Jean faced the challenges of old age. We always saw the both of them as role models for how to age with grace and dignity. We wanted to be like them when we got older, continuing to write, read, go to concerts, lectures, etc. And we still have that as a goal. While it is sad that they are both gone now, I hope the family takes solace in the fact that they both lived long, full, active lives! Their spirit lives on.

Jim Daniels and Kristin Kovacic

Jim Daniels - February 19, 2021 at 03:23 PM

MM

Thank you for your kind words and shared memories. I remember your family coming to Fernwood. They both loved to host the writers, especially the Sunday happy hours.

Melissa Markley - February 23, 2021 at 10:31 AM

JS

“ Loosing Paul is difficult. We both have frond memories of times we spent with Paul and Mary Jean. When John and family relocated to Philadelphia, we had no family and then Paul and Mary Jean reached out to us and quickly became part of our family. We spent most Christmas Eves with them in Berwyn, stayed with them in Chautauqua, and Ted and John visited in Millersville and Willow Valley. We were so proud to have them at our wedding. Truly an amazing man. We will carry these memories forever. Our sincere sympathies go out to his wonderful family.

John And Ted Schmiechen

John Schmiechen - February 16, 2021 at 05:03 PM



Thank you for your kind words. They so enjoyed you both. Good memories to cherish. Love, Melissa

Melissa Markley - February 23, 2021 at 10:33 AM