

Rev. Bruce E. Billman, HR PC (USA)

ROCHESTER, NY - On Monday, March 1, in Rochester, NY, the Rev. E. Bruce Billman died and was folded into the Love of God – a God he had served throughout his life.

Bruce was born in New Castle, PA, in 1934, and was ordained to the Presbyterian ministry in 1960. He had degrees from Oberlin College, Colgate Rochester Crozier Divinity School, and New York Theological Seminary.

Over the course of his ministry, he served The Brick Church in Rochester, NY; Christ Church in the Hills, Schenectady, NY; Grace Presbyterian Church, Wichita, KS; and Christ, Grace, Westminster, and South Presbyterian churches in Rochester. Bruce was also a substance abuse counselor and Chaplain of the Rochester Presbyterian Home.

As a young assistant pastor at the Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester, Bruce sat with a cherished parishioner, Virginia West Davidson, in the late 1960s and told her he was a gay man. With this revelation, he set in motion a large part of the movement that would eventually change the exclusionary policies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). “Ginny” Davidson became a Vice-Moderator of the denomination and chaired the historic Task Force on Homosexuality from 1976-78. Bruce was a founding member of Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (PLGC) in the 1980s and was a beloved member of the national Queer advocacy group founded and centered at the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Rochester: That All May Freely Serve (TAMFS).

Bruce spent time with the Taizé Brothers in Pine Mountain, VA, and appreciated their strong sense of community and contemplative form of worship. When he told one of the Taizé brothers that he was gay, a minister, and loved Christ, Brother Christopher responded “I know you love Christ. He shines on your face.”

Bruce is remembered by all he knew for his compassion, warmth, infectious wit, and lover of the arts (particularly the movies “Night of the Iguana” and “Chocolat,” and “Room with a View”).

While serving Christ Church in Schenectady, he had a painting drawn of “The Turtle Woman,” affectionately named for his dear friend Virginia Davidson. Turtles, Bruce would say, do not advance without sticking out their necks.

Not only did Bruce Billman “stick out his neck” on all manner of social justice concerns, he was the inspiration for many others to stick out their necks too. Bruce was present for a 2015 Rochester celebration of Queer Presbyterian activism headlined, “Rock Stars and Prophets: Generations of Justice and Love.” To all who were present and part of this history, Bruce will be treasured as a genuine rock star-prophet who paved the way for many others to partner in the work of justice and love. We miss you, Burce. For more information: www.tamfs.org

