

Krister Stendahl hailed as scholar, church reformer and interfaith pioneer: In memoriam

News in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

Krister Stendahl, a biblical scholar, one-time Lutheran bishop of his native Stockholm and former dean of Harvard University Divinity School, is being remembered for his pathbreaking efforts in Christian-Jewish understanding and his plainspoken support for women's ordination and gay rights.

Stendahl was a week shy of his 87th birthday when he died April 15 in Boston. He was lauded as one of "the most distinguished biblical scholars, theological leaders and insightful churchmen of the 20th century" by Mark S. Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "He spoke what he believed was a timely word," Hanson said, "even if what he said might provoke others to disagreement."

The New Testament scholar began teaching at Harvard Divinity School in 1954 and served as its dean from 1968 to 1979. He was credited with expanding the diversity of the school, especially in recruiting women and African Americans. Stendahl was among the best known of Lutheran scholars advocating women's ordination in the 1970s.

As bishop of Stockholm from 1984 to 1988, Stendahl helped lead efforts that eventually resulted in the national church becoming independent of the Swedish government. He returned to Cambridge to become chaplain at Harvard Divinity, then received an endowed professorship in Christian studies at Brandeis University in the early 1990s.

Stendahl once chaired the World Council of Churches' Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People, described in a Harvard obituary as "a commission that prepared the way for much important interfaith work of the last 30 years."

Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, said in a statement that Stendahl “was certainly a practitioner of the ‘golden rule’ of ecumenism—he taught us to try to ‘understand others, even as you hope to be understood by them.’”

Among many honors, he received in 1988 the first Distinguished Service Medal from the Association of Theological Schools, the seminary accrediting agency for the U.S. and Canada. Stendahl’s books included *The Bible and the Role of Women* (1966), *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (1976) and *Meanings* (1984).

After he retired from his Brandeis post, Stendahl and his wife, Brita, continued efforts to build Christian-Jewish relations, such as fostering visits by U.S. scholars to the Holy Land. He also served as codirector of a religious pluralism center at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem in 1994.

In 1990 and again in 2001, Stendahl praised three Lutheran congregations—which were later penalized—that conducted unauthorized ordinations of gays and lesbians. Though ailing in recent years, he was present at the 2001 ordination of Anita Hill in St. Paul, Minnesota, and among religious leaders in 2003 in New Hampshire at the unprecedented Episcopal consecration of V. Gene Robinson, a partnered gay bishop-elect.

A memorial service for Stendahl was scheduled for May 16 at Harvard’s Memorial Church.