

Phyllis Tickle, a best-selling author on spirituality, dies at 81

by [David Gibson](#); DeChant-Hughes Public Relations; added sources in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

Phyllis Tickle, a best-selling author on American faith and spirituality, died September 22 under hospice care at her farm in Lucy, Tennessee. She was 81.

In May [Tickle had announced](#) that she had stage IV lung cancer.

Tickle began to achieve prominence when she was recruited by *Publishers Weekly* in the early 1990s to start its religion division. Then her first big book, *Re-Discovering the Sacred: Spirituality in America*, came out in 1995, followed two years later by *God-Talk in America*.

“She taught me that talent in young people must be nurtured,” [wrote Jana Riess](#), an author and columnist who worked with Tickle at *Publishers Weekly*. “There must be hundreds of us Tickle protégées out there.”

In 2008, with *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, she probed how a new and vibrant Christianity is recovering elements of the past and carrying them into the future.

In [a 2004 profile in the *Christian Century*](#), Tickle told Wendy Murray about growing up in Johnson City, Tennessee, with her father wanting her to follow in his footsteps as a college professor.

In the 1950s she taught high-school Latin and English, and in the 1960s she taught in higher education and served as dean of humanities at the Memphis College of Art.

She then moved into publishing, and spent nearly two decades as editor and publisher of St. Luke’s Press and its imprints before joining *Publishers Weekly*.

“In a time when much ‘spirituality’ writing is of an air-heady sort,” historian Martin Marty told Murray in 2004, “hers is heady, and yet anchored in the great traditions.”

Tickle was a lector and lay eucharistic minister in the Episcopal Church, and she kept the liturgical hours for decades, writing the three-part series *The Divine Hours*.

“Most Christians are really afraid of pietism, and the last thing I needed was the sense I was being pious,” Tickle told Murray. “Religiosity gives me a stomachache.”

Yet she was noticing many people attracted to liturgical traditions.

“We all have flaws and faults,” Tickle said. “That’s why we have spiritual disciplines. These things teach us.”