

Harvard pastor, theologian Peter Gomes dies at 68

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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(RNS) The Rev. Peter Gomes, the longtime minister of Harvard University's Memorial Church who was hailed as one of the nation's top preachers, died Monday (Feb. 28) at age 68.

Gomes died from complications of a stroke he suffered in December, the university said.

Gomes defied stereotypes throughout his life with his atypical attributes -- a black Republican and openly gay minister who grew up in Plymouth, Mass.

"A more colorful colleague none of us ... could ever imagine, nor a more faithful friend and steady presence," said Harvard Divinity School Dean William A. Graham in a message to students and faculty on Tuesday.

The American Baptist minister spent most of his career at Harvard, serving first as assistant minister at the Memorial Church in 1970. In 1974, he became a professor of Christian morals and the church's minister.

He was featured in pulpits across the country and named by Time magazine in 1979 as one of seven "star preachers." He participated in the inaugurations of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush and

Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick.

"He was one of the nation's truly great preachers and one of Harvard's truly great scholars," said Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Gomes wrote best-selling books on the Bible and preaching and published 11 volumes of sermons. In a 1998 interview he explained why he described his preaching style as "a precise tornado": "There's a lot of energy and there's a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of wind and a lot of motion and movement, but it's heading toward a precise target."

Long known as a conservative, Gomes made a surprise announcement in 1991 that he was gay in response to anti-gay rhetoric on campus.

"I acted not as an outraged homosexual, but as an outraged Christian," he said after the incident.

Leaders of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force praised Gomes for being a courageous model for religious people who affirm gay rights.

"He came out as a gay man when it was scandalous for clergy of his position and caliber, of any caliber, to do so," said Rea Carey, the task force's executive director. "And yet, he did so with a clarity and grace that provided theological shelter for many a young person struggling with their sexuality."