

James Kenneth Echols, first African American Lutheran seminary president, dies at age 67

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by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [January 30, 2019](#) issue



James Kenneth Echols. Photo by Tricia Koning/Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

James Kenneth Echols, scholar and leader in Lutheran theological education, died December 22 in Philadelphia at age 67. His obituary in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* gave the cause of death as complications after a fall at home.

He was the first person of African descent to be president of a Lutheran seminary in North America, leading the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago from 1997 to 2011. Among the accomplishments of his tenure were the creation of the Center of

Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice, an endowed chair in Christian-Muslim studies and interfaith relations, and the Albert “Pete” Pero Jr. Multicultural Center.

From 2012 until his retirement in 2015, he was director of theological education and networks for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in the Philadelphia area.

Richard J. Perry Jr., professor emeritus of church and society and urban ministry at LSTC, called Echols “a giant in the world of theological education . . . who stirred many people of African descent to aspire to be faithful in their service in the church and the world.”

Echols was the editor of *I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Future of Multicultural America* (2004).

In [a 2003 *Christian Century* article asking seminary presidents what they would do with \\$1 billion](#), Echols dreamed of having funds to renovate the campus and support programs for youth and young adult formation—as well as increasing financial aid and salaries for faculty and staff.

“I’d put 15 percent of the gift in the endowment to support a first-class program of lay and continuing theological education,” he wrote. “Extension centers could be established both in and outside of congregations, and a special grants program could assist congregations in their own Christian education efforts.”

He also imagined partnering with congregations and community organizations to do justice work in the world.

Echols was a leader in the Conference of International Black Lutherans and the African Descent Lutheran Association. He published in the areas of church history, theology, and black American Lutheranism.

Prior to serving at LSTC, Echols was dean at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, now United Lutheran Seminary, from 1991 to 1997, where he was the first person of color to hold that role—for which he was unanimously chosen, noted his colleague Katie Day, professor of church and society at ULS.

“Jim radiated a depth of wisdom and clarity of perspective that we all recognized,” she said in a statement. “Jim had the ability to see through complex institutional dynamics to what really mattered, what value was at stake. For example, Jim could

call out racism in its myriad manifestations in ways that could be heard and addressed.”

He had joined the Philadelphia seminary’s faculty in 1982, primarily teaching American church history. After his ordination in 1979, he served parishes in Connecticut and New York. He earned degrees from Temple University, the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, and Yale University.

A version of this article, which was edited January 18, appears in the print edition under the title “People: James Kenneth Echols.”