

Dean Peerman, a *Century* editor for 60 years, dies at age 87

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by [David Heim](#) in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue



From left, John Buchanan, publisher emeritus of the *Christian Century*, and contributing editors Dean Peerman and Martin E. Marty. Photo by Micah Marty.

Since 1959 virtually every sentence published by the *Christian Century* has benefited from the wisdom and editorial judgment of Dean Peerman. He died March 26 in Chicago at age 87.

His 60 years with the *Century* included stints as managing editor, senior editor, and, most recently, contributing editor. He wrote countless signed and unsigned editorials, articles, and reviews for the magazine, and mentored several generations of copy editors. He was the keeper of the magazine's manual of style and the repository of its institutional memory.

A native of Benton, Illinois, Peerman graduated from Northwestern University and Yale Divinity School before beginning his career as an editor and journalist. His editing was a model of tact and care. One of his earliest assignments for the *Century* was to copyedit [Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which the *Century* was the first national publication to print in its entirety.](#) When asked what it was like to edit King's essay, he would say only that he was glad the editors of the book version chose to use his rendition.

On behalf of the *Century* he covered the final session of Vatican II in Rome in 1964, and [he and fellow editor Martin E. Marty participated in the second civil rights march in Selma, Alabama, in March 1965.](#) Always gentle in manner, he was a passionate and courageous advocate for social justice. His own reporting often focused on issues of human rights, especially in Latin America, where he traveled frequently. The trip that stuck out most in his mind was when [he went to Chile after the 1973 military coup to investigate the murder of an American student at the hands of the government.](#) He traveled to Mexico in 1968 to interview political prisoners after a violent crackdown on student protests killed dozens and sent thousands to jail.

An American Baptist, he was influenced by the pacifist message of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He was a conscientious objector to military service, a position that was "kind of unheard of" by the draft board in his hometown, he recounted in a conversation with colleagues. "I was influenced by the Sermon on the Mount, and I remember being so struck by that in Sunday school. . . . there were people in my home church who wouldn't speak to me, especially the woman who was head of the local draft board and also a member of my church."

A renowned amateur actor, he appeared in over 60 shows in the Chicago area. In 1995 he was given the award for distinction in lay ministry by Yale Divinity School. His collegiality, judicious temperament, and prodigious work ethic profoundly shaped the *Christian Century* and all who worked alongside him.

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