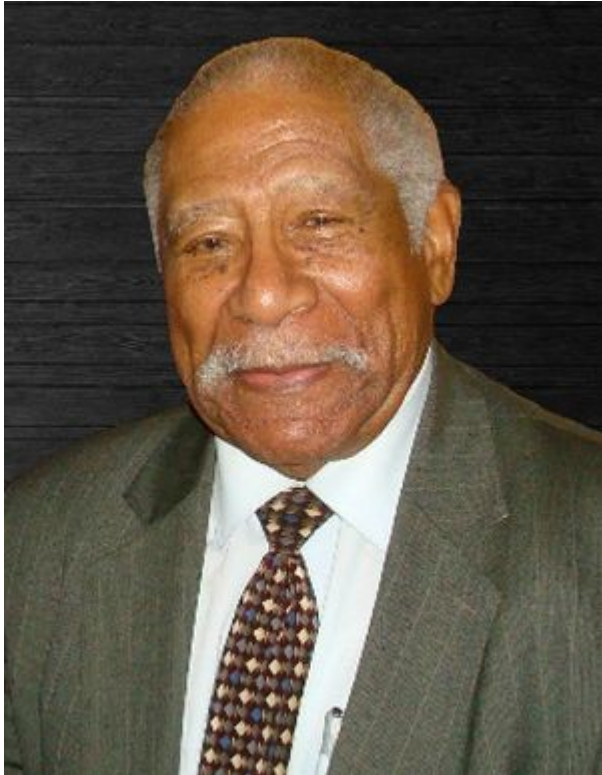


Gayraud Wilmore, famed scholar of black church history, dies at 98

by [Gail Strange](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue



(Photo courtesy of Presbyterian News Service)

Gayraud Wilmore, a pastor, renowned scholar of African American church history, and key figure in the civil rights movement, died April 18 at the age of 98.

Wilmore received his call to the ministry in 1943 while dodging bullets in a foxhole. He had been drafted into the army and, as a member of the famed Buffalo Soldiers, served with the all-black 92nd Infantry Division in Italy during World War II.

After the war, Wilmore pastored Second Presbyterian Church in West Chester, Pennsylvania, for three years before becoming the associate executive of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.'s Department of Social Education and Action. Ten years later, he was appointed the first executive director of the denomination's newly created Commission on Race and Religion.

In this position Wilmore oversaw several racial justice initiatives and organized protests.

He traveled to Presbyterian churches to train pastors to organize protests and lobby for civil rights, and he joined demonstrations throughout the South. Wilmore was one of the founders of the National Conference of Black Churchmen in 1969 and played an integral role in the creation of the UPCUSA's Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People in 1970.

Wilmore enjoyed a long and influential academic career. As a leading scholar in black theology, Wilmore was a professor at six different seminaries and lectured at colleges across the United States. From 1982 to 1987, he served as dean of divinity at New York Theological Seminary.

Wilmore wrote or edited 16 books throughout his career, including *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* and *Pragmatic Spirituality*, which was published in June 2004. He was a contributing editor to *Christianity and Crisis*. —Presbyterian News Service