

Rev. Dr. Howard L. Rice, Professor of Ministry, Emeritus, 1931-2010

Let me begin with the mostly unadorned facts, which are remarkable enough without much embellishment.¹ Howard Leland Rice was born December 30, 1931, in Marshfield, Wis., to Howard Leland and Alice Marie (Nelson) Rice. He attended Marshfield High School and Carroll College (Waukesha, Wis.), graduating from the latter with a BA on history 1953. He entered McCormick Theological Seminary in the fall of 1953, married Nancy Lee Zoerb in August 1955, and graduated from McCormick with his BD in 1956. Howard and Nancy had two children, Wendy and Amanda, both born after those seminary years. Howard was ordained by the Presbytery of Winnebago on August 20, 1956. His first call was as pastor of the House of Faith Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis. Then, from 1961 to 1968, he served as pastor to Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Chicago. In 1968, he joined the San Francisco Theological Seminary as professor of Ministry, where he remained until his retirement in 1997. Howard was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis prior to his appointment to SFTS, and he spent all his time at SFTS either on crutches or, after 1971, confined to a wheelchair. Only after Howard and Nancy moved to Santa Rosa was that diagnosis changed to spinal cord damage. All those years he lived with an inaccurate diagnosis.

In 1982, Howard added the duties of Chaplain of the Seminary to his teaching. But already in the mid 1970s, he began organizing retreat opportunities at SFTS for students and local clergy, signaling a farsighted understanding of the value of retreats in renewing pastors and laity. Howard was elected moderator of the 191st General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church (1980), a General Assembly working on issues of reunion. In 1991, Howard published his influential Reformed

Spirituality, An Introduction for Believers and, in 1998, *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide*.ⁱⁱ From the fall of 2003 to the summer of 2005, he was drawn out of retirement to serve as Interim President of Cook College and Theological School in Tempe AZ., sensing in a calling to a ministry he had followed for years.

Howard received a number of honors in his long and distinguished ministerial career, including two honorary Doctor of Divinity degrees, from Whitworth College (1978) and from his alma mater Carroll College (1980).ⁱⁱⁱ In 1986, he was the recipient of the McCormick Theological Seminary Distinguished Alumnus Award. In honor of his retirement from SFTS, on May 6 1997, the Honorable Lynn C. Woolsey presented a tribute to Howard before the U.S. House of Representatives. In 2007, SFTS Trustee and Alumna, the Rev. Jackie Leonard, made her first gift toward the Rice Family Chair in Christian Spirituality. In endowing this faculty chair, she sought to honor Howard and Nancy Rice, the late Rev. Wendy Rice Dreitcer and her husband, Dr. Andrew Deeter Dreitcer, and their longstanding contributions to the spiritual nurture of students, church leaders and congregations.

In the spring of 2010, after battling a stubborn bone infection for weeks, Howard and Nancy made the decision that he would return to their home in Pilgrim Place (Claremont, CA), and that he would accept Hospice care while he lived, as Howard always wanted to do, as fully as possible until his last moment. This moment came peacefully on August 8, 2010, surrounded by his family.

But it's in the stories where Howard's life comes alive. After Howard asked me to do his eulogy, I was able to engage him in telling me some of these stories again. Let

me highlight several here, and invite your story telling to continue in the time after this service and in the days and weeks ahead.

Howard said of his SFTS years: "I came to SF TS because the director of urban ministry for the Presbyterian Church, David Ramage, was aware that my diagnosis of MS was making it harder and harder for me to function as a pastor in a climate like Chicago and that I needed a more moderate climate. He invited me to come to general assembly in Minneapolis where he introduced me to Dr. Arnold Come [president of SFTS]. From the first, I was impressed at Arnold's humanity and I think he saw potential in me. Those were the days when a president selected faculty without going through the process used today, so Arnold agreed to give me a two-year appointment. On nothing more than that we moved in September of 1968. The Democratic convention was going on in Chicago and we weren't sure we'd get to the train station because the streets were full of rioters. Our train deposited us in Oakland where we were we were met by a student and driven to our new home 109 Bolinas Ave, a little gray house across from the entrance to the seminary that looked amazingly like the house we had left in Chicago. After the first year of teaching and meeting with students, we were very much at home. I shall never forget the faculty meeting where a group of students marched in and demanded that I be given tenure. I've never since disagreed with the importance of student power. It certainly benefited me!" You can get a sense of how dearly loved Howard was by students, to whom he was a true pastor.

I asked Howard how his pastoral experience followed him to the seminary. "I brought the mentality of a pastor with me" he said. "I loved to preach and SFTS

provided the opportunity to do so frequently. I must say that I was used to more diversity in the church that I found at the seminary where most of the students were male and of European origin [how much has changed!]. I [also had opportunity for a lot of] pastoral care, sometimes in student apartments, sometimes in my office, and at other times in our home. Nancy continued to serve as a hostess for students who were welcome in our home during our time there." In his own way, Howard noted the incredible hospitality that flowed from their home, his office, and his person. So many of you here are witnesses to and recipients of that hospitality.

Howard, again: "Serving as moderator of the General Assembly was a unique experience. It involved a great deal of travel made somewhat more difficult by my being in a wheelchair, but the airlines and the staff of the General Assembly did their best and we traveled widely. The most important and therefore memorable part of the experience was the enthusiasm and warmth and hospitality offered where ever I went. I represented the church that people loved, and I realized then that in a system such as ours where there are no human leaders who are widely recognized, the moderator of the General Assembly is as close as we come to such a figure." Howard had big enough shoulders and a big enough heart to carry us all.

The other highlight of Howard's moderatorial year was his calling of three General Assembly sponsored prayer retreats, one in San Anselmo, one in Dubuque, and one at Princeton. Each Presbytery was to elect a delegate. The project met with a bit of resistance, Howard noted wryly, "because it was considered to be wasting money." But, he quickly added, "I have learned through the years since that some of those

who attended experienced profound life changes, and I am in touch with some of them to this day.” This vignette underlines Howard’s profound love and respect for the power of retreats to affect conversion. The retreats that Howard began offering before the Program in Christian Spirituality took root continued as the “Companions on the Inner Way retreat/conference. Howard himself was involved heavily in Companions from 1993-2004, continuing into his retirement a ministry that he had fostered and loved. Indeed Howard is one of the key persons in the important shift in consciousness among Protestants about the value of retreat as a place and time for significant spiritual growth.

Howard named the greatest pain and most tragic experience of his life as the death of his daughter Wendy, who died of a brain tumor in 2004. How fitting, and I believe not a coincidence that Howard died on Wendy’s birthday. Howard’s words again: “Nancy and I will never get past the grief. I still think of her every day and have her picture near my desk and near my bed. I know there are stages of grief but my experience is that they come all at once and get mixed up so that I’m here today [this is late July] in denial, anger, some acceptance and the ability to move on. I’ve let go of trying to bargain with God to spare her because it didn’t work!” But there were graces hidden in this pain too, and, with a little reflection Howard offered: “I’m no longer afraid to die, having watched Wendy die so thoughtfully. It also opened me up to being on Hospice, which I would never have done without the experience of Hospice with Wendy. I love it, too, when the Hospice nurse puts her arm around Nancy. I just love that.” Howard’s words remind us that we can honor him deeply by

continuing to put our arms around everyone that Howard loves. That's a VERY BIG group! He'll just love that.

Finally, I asked Howard what he wanted to be remembered for. That stumped him a bit, but, characteristically, he soon found his voice: "I hope people remember me for my sense of humor, my ability to laugh in awkward and sometimes painful situations. I hope they remember my tenacity. I'm a little like a bulldog. Once I decide on the rightness or wrongness of an issue, it is hard for me to change my mind. The underdog has always had my sympathy and support. Thus, I've been a supporter of civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, and the rights of those who are emotionally ill. Fortunately I've had the opportunity to engage in my passions. Finally, I would like to be remembered as the outgoing extrovert that I am. I love people and can honestly say that I can't think of anyone whom I dislike."

Thank you, Howard, for giving us this chance to remember you, your family, your moment in history, and how deeply and faithfully you engaged it. May we honor your memory by deeply, honestly and prayerfully engaging our own moment and place in history.

Elizabeth Liebert, August 20, 2010

ⁱ Thanks to Michael Peterson, of the SFTS branch of the GTU library, for providing much of this biographical information.

ⁱⁱ Also co-authored by Howard and James C. Huffstutler: *Reformed Worship* (Geneva Press, 2001) and co-edited with Lamar Williamson, Jr. *A Book of Reformed Prayers* (Westminster John Knox, 1998).

ⁱⁱⁱ Both these institutions are now Universities.