

# Rev. Dr. Jon L. Regier



Jon Louis Regier, the son of a poor Louisiana farmer and Mennonite Brethren minister, rose to become one of the foremost advocates and practitioners of the Social Gospel Movement in the United States, first as the director of a settlement house on the South Side of Chicago, then as Associate General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ (1965-73), head of Christian Life and Mission, and finally as the director of the New York State Council of Churches. Believing that living by the Biblical commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself trumped any and all inter-church doctrinal differences, Regier dedicated his life to working in the Ecumenical and later the Inter-Faith movements. Dr. Regier, whose health had been failing the past 10 months, died of congestive heart failure while in hospice care in Durham, North Carolina, on September 2.

Dr. Regier was the youngest of seven children, five of whom made it to adulthood. His father, John R. Regier, lost his farm in Lake Charles, Louisiana, in 1921 as a series of hurricanes swept through the Delta destroying his house, barn and crop. Homeless, the family migrated to California, where Jon Louis was born in a tank house, their shelter, on his grandparents' ranch in Dinuba, California. Soon his family began a peripatetic life, moving up and down the central valleys of California as John R. served multiple churches. Jon L. Regier began work at eight years old, picking almonds and doing other farm chores. His sisters and mother cleaned other people's homes. His father, of the Mennonite Brethren, was a preacher and carpenter.

An epiphanic moment shaped Dr. Regier's worldview while hitch hiking to an unaccredited bible college in Indiana. As he stood in the blistering sun, next to a never-ending cornfield, a huge Packard sedan slowed, raising his hopes, only to have a pamphlet, *Jesus Saves*, thrown at his feet, as it sped off. Dr. Regier realized that more than people's souls

needed saving, that Christian love must be extended to the body as well as the soul in this world. He dedicated his life to that ideal.

Jon Regier graduated from Huntington College, Indiana, in philosophy in 1944, and McCormick Theological Seminary with a Bachelor's of Divinity in 1947 and was ordained into the Presbyterian Church in 1947. He received his Doctorate of Divinity from Payne Theological Seminary, Wilberforce, Ohio, in 1959, and became a certified social worker from the University of Michigan, School of Social Work. Dr. Regier was the Associate Director of Dodge Christian Community House in Detroit, 1947-49; Head Resident of Howell Neighborhood House and Pastor of Howell Memorial Church, Chicago, 1949-58; Lecturer in Social Group Work at McCormick Seminary, 1952-1958; Executive Secretary Division of Home Missions, National Council of Churches of Christ, in New York, 1958-73; and Executive Director of the New York State Council of Churches, 1973-1987. He retired in 1987.

At Howell House, Dr. Regier developed programs to work with delinquent youth and to stop the gang violence between young Slovak and Mexican Americans. He was a member of the hard-to-reach youth research committee, the Chicago Youth Commission, and chairman of the Special Study on Delinquency. A group he organized there in the 1950s, the Pilsen Neighbors, is still active in the community.

At the National Council of Churches, starting in 1958 he directed home missions and then, until 1973, the Division of Christian Life and Mission, which included the NCC's programs on racial, social and economic justice as well as evangelism, international affairs, culture and the arts and some specialized ministries. The ecumenical movement, as expressed through the NCC and the World Council of Churches, was strong during much of this period. Under Dr. Regier's aegis, the state Migrant Ministries, which had been providing direct services to migrant workers for years, moved to assist farm workers in their efforts to organize for dignity and justice. The California Migrant Ministry, working closely with Cesar Chavez in the 1960s, led the way to the formation of the National Farm Worker Ministry in 1971.

The Delta Ministry in Mississippi was another ministry begun during Dr. Regier's tenure. Starting in the mid-1960s, the Delta Ministry helped register 70,000 new voters, provided temporary housing for cotton workers on strike, worked with allies to launch the Head Start programs and to end discrimination and segregation in public schools. As the theologian Harvey Cox said at the time, "The Delta Ministry is one evidence that God may not be as dead as some people think."

Dr. Regier was a key figure in the establishment of the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches, which was authorized by the General Board of the NCC in June 1963 to act on behalf of the NCC in the civil rights struggle. The Commission worked closely with national denominations associated with the NCC and across faith lines in support of such efforts as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, Freedom Summer in 1964, and both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Though Dr. Regier worked 18-hour days during the 1960s, he said he was never tired. "I felt every day that I was doing God's work." He was most proud of his behind-the-scenes efforts to support A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington in August 1963. In June of that year, Dr. Regier attended an emergency midnight gathering at the Harlem YMCA where Dr. Kenneth Clark, Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, James Baldwin and representatives of major Protestant denominations met to plan how to aid the insolvent civil rights organizations in funding the March on Washington. Dr. Regier helped organize monetary support for the March and helped organize national church participation in the March.

Dr. Regier's life's work was based on his experience that, American churches are overly self-centered - too focused on ritual and institutional growth, and too little engaged in the concerns and crises of the secular world. I believe this leads many churches to become disengaged and uninvolved in God's work in the world and therefore increasingly marginal and irrelevant to people both within and without their congregations.

Dr. Regier's efforts at the New York State Council of Churches included the creation of the Task Force for a Safer Society in response to the Attica uprisings. The Task Force published *Instead of Prisons* (1976) and did ten major studies of problems and treatment of sex offenders. Dr. Regier was also active in the New York State Coalition for Criminal Justice; New York State Impact; New York State Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights; Mutuality in Mission (a Latin American and US clergy exchange); and Pax Shalom, a local church peace education program. Dr. Regier involved religious leaders in solving critical community disputes and developed conflict resolution programs. Dr. Regier was a founding member of the Inter-religious Council of Central New York in 1976. In 1987, he received their leadership award and in 1998, he served as their interim executive director.

Dr. Regier began sailing in 1975, on the lakes of Upstate New York. Dr. Regier was the chaplain for the Henderson Harbor Yacht Club for many years and the commodore from 1996 to 1998.

Dr. Regier is **survived** by his wife of 66 years, Joyce Palmer Regier; his children, Jon Denniston Regier, Marjorie Grace Regier, Susan Marie Regier and Luke Roth Regier; his daughters-in-law, Wanda Troy and Donna Zielinski; his son-in-law, Brian North, as well as his grandchildren, Brandon North, Danielle North, Matthew Troy-Regier, Sierra Troy-Regier, Sydney Regier and Julia Regier; and his great-granddaughter, Magdalena Regier. He is also survived by a sister, Esther Oleari.

**Service** and reception will be at Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church, 5299 Jamesville Road, DeWitt, NY 13214 on October 19, 2014 at 2 p.m. **Gifts** in memory of Jon Regier can be sent to: church listed above or mailed to Interfaith Works, 3049 East Genesee Street, Syracuse, NY 13224, Center for Dialogue.

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