



The Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ



Purpose (from the Gospel of Matthew):

To love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves

Vision:

United in Christ's love, a just world for all

Mission:

United in Spirit and inspired by God's grace, we welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all



Rev. Hal Harrison,
former Associate Conference Minister
of the Vermont Conference passed away
peacefully on Sunday Morning June 6, 2021

Harold L. ("Hal") Harrison, age 90, died peacefully on June 6, 2021.

Hal grew up in a small Iowa farming town and graduated from Grinnell College in 1952. At Andover-Newton Theological School, he met his feisty future wife, Mary Ellen ("Bettsy") Betts. They were married in 1959.

Hal was ordained to Christian Ministry of Word & Sacrament and served as pastor to congregations in New Hampshire and Connecticut for 20 years. In 1976, Hal accepted a call to serve as Associate Conference Minister for the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ, a ministry which he loved and retired from in 1995.

All along the way, Hal and Bettsy collaborated with each other in ministry. They co-led innumerable summer camp programs, elder hostels, workshops, retreats, and more. Hal used to say that "Hal-and-Bettsy" was one word.

They made a home for themselves and their children, Jeremy and David, in Springfield, VT. From this base of operations, Hal traveled Vermont's highways and byways to offer support and care to congregations and to serve as pastor to pastors.

Hal also devoted his energy to program development. He founded the Vermont Academy of Spiritual Training (a three-year program for lay people), participated in the development and oversight of Covenant Hills Christian Camp (for school-age campers), and facilitated a partnership between the United Church of Zambia and the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ. Sometimes these ventures overlapped, such as Hal and Bettsy co-directing "African Camp" at Covenant Hills.

On a personal level, Hal also quietly served as a Spiritual Director, welcoming spiritual seekers to prayerful conversation by his wood stove as well as rendezvousing at diners and monasteries. A lifelong student and educator, Hal continued leading Bible Studies during his fourteen years as a resident of Havenwood-Heritage Heights in Concord, NH. He reveled in a leisurely study of Scripture, describing the experience as being akin to "walking together in a beautiful orchard" or "dining at a fine French restaurant." In the days leading up to his 90th birthday, Hal celebrated by reading the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) over the phone with fellow spiritual pilgrims.

Hal was honored locally, regionally, and nationally for his service. Nevertheless, Hal prided himself in simple country living, leaving these instructions for his funeral service: "I just wish

that the promises of hope be heard and that the Gospel be shown. My life, I think, has been simple and my funeral can be simple too... One more thing: I have never seen a service of the United Church of Christ which has not had mistakes. So, sin boldly.

Hal is survived by his sons, Jeremy (Danielle) and David; his grandchildren, Amanda and Nick (Emily), and their children; his longtime friends, John and Faye Buttrick; his Buttrick goddaughters, Alison (Craig), Andrea (Joshua), Emily (Chris), and their families; and a host of friends, colleagues, directees, mentees, and students too numerous to list. Hal loved them each by name. Hal is predeceased by his wife of 48 years, Mary Ellen ("Bettsy") Harrison; his parents Warren and Mary (nee Baird) Harrison; his brother, Dale Harrison; and countless friends and colleagues in ministry.

A Service of Thanksgiving will be held at First Congregational Church (UCC), Springfield, Vermont on Sunday, June 20 at 3 p.m. The service will also be livestreamed via facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/fccuccspringfield/> It can also be accessed from the church website homepage at <https://fccuccspfdvt.org>.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the Harrison Scholarship Fund, Vermont Conference UCC, 36 North Main St, Randolph, VT 05060, or go to www.vtcucc.org.

Remembering Rev. Hal Harrison

"Ever since I started here in my role as your Associate Conference Minister, people have talked to me about how much Hal Harrison meant to them. He mentored so many people in our Conference, especially younger clergy who are still with us today. In addition, he helped start the VAST program among us, which had such an impact on so many lay people and churches in the Conference, and continues to impact us to this day. A number of months ago, I was part of a phone conversation with Kurt Shaffert, Hal and I. And as Hal remembered all the things that he was part of at the Conference, he focused in on how much fun he had doing them! His infectious joy about his ministry was such a gift to me, and I know to so many others in our Conference. Hal, I am blessed to walk in your footsteps. Peace, Paul"



Associate Conference Minister, Paul Sangree



"Hal's passing is the last of the three greatest mentors one could have ever asked for in their life. I did a lot of Christian Education and UCC Curriculum in my younger years and Hal took over during my time from duties Lois Sundeen and Lois Peeler had been directing. I was a member of the Vacation Church School team in the summer of 1967 trained by Lois S. but Hal forever endorsed the program and a lot of churches in Vermont got some great hands on enrichment and training time. Once the Vermont Conference Team had been established, Drucilla Schneiderheinze kept the office and staff

on their toes, I worked as bookkeeper for several years and another woman was the support person. Marylou Crooks took over for Drucilla but Charles, John and Hal were the staff team. They each had different responsibilities and filled them well. Hal was a good listener, a kind soul, smart, pastor, supportive and loving. Those traits led to his leadership beyond Christian Education as Spiritual Director. Hal's smile lite up any room, his warmth guided the feelings of welcome and his kind fatherly soul brought comfort. He also had a way about him that pushed me to lead an awful lot of Curriculum training events in the State -- I've never been quite sure how he convinced me when the UCC changed curriculum that I needed to keep up and be trained so I could train others. The patience Hal had for the UCC curriculum. I will forever be blessed by the things I learned from the Vermont Conference Staff in the late 70's and early 80's. Those three cleverly nudged me toward

Seminary with the support of my own husband, the Rev. R. Ward Wilson. I am indebted. And they continued to support me in my roles in the conference and as an ordained pastor. If that doesn't tell you something about Hal's goodness and team building and skill, I should probably mention that we had the best parties ever -- we loved gathering around enjoying each others company. I am indebted to those of you that are younger that continue to serve and love the Vermont Conference and her churches but age has a great advantage because I knew and worked with Hal, John and Charles and I am so sorry for those of you that missed that experience. Blessings, Rev. Jane E. Wilson"



"Hal Harrison joined our VT Conference "family" at an auspicious time in our history (aren't they all?). Ed Treat, the Conference Minister and, IMHO, the epitome of the "old guys", but whom this "young turk" had come to respect and enjoy immensely, had taken on Lois Sundeen, an extremely capable Christian Education practitioner and my immediate predecessor at Bethany Church in Montpelier, in a position on the Conference staff. Lois took me lovingly under her wing; Ed, at least somewhat in deference to Bethany's Senior Pastor Wally Short, also welcomed me wholeheartedly into the Conference "family". Transitions happen (panta hrea, everything flows); the Conference eventually needed a new staff person with responsibilities for Christian Education.

Hal was faced early on with Lois' immensely important Vacation Church School Worker's Program, which hired and trained 8 or 10 college and seminary students to run two-week Vacation Church School programs on contract with various churches in the Conference, following an intensive live-in two-week training period, held at Atkinson House in Newbury, and extensive supervision throughout their field assignments. Hal and I continued to operate this program for several years, always tweaking it as feedback indicated. Most churches were helped, but, more importantly, virtually every student was helped to understand him/herself in relation to their sense of call to some form of ministry in some part of the wider church's life. Hal continued many of these relationships until the very end of his life.

He was always gentle and unassuming, keenly observant of the dynamics of a situation, and creatively compassionate in his response. He thoroughly enjoyed a good laugh: one day we were hiking Camel's Hump with that year's group of students. As we took a rest and water break, Hal made some remark about how heavy his backpack seemed. Upon finding it about half full of rocks, he burst out laughing and said "If this is where you think you belong, I'm glad to have helped you get here!" That was classic Hal.

My most difficult time with him was sitting with him at the hospital as his beloved Betsy was dying. He was so devoted to her, and his pain was excruciating. In his retirement, Hal continued his vital interest in spiritual development, serving as mentor/counselor to countless people, often related to his involvement in South Church, UCC, Concord, NH; (he'd moved to Havenwood by then). We've kept in touch (how could we not?), and I've visited with him often during my own retirement. Perhaps his last 'public' appearance was at a "boundaries workshop" required of clergy, active or not, in Bethel, VT, literally the day before everything shut down due to Covid 19. He was his usual happy, welcoming self, albeit a bit more acerbic than previously. He still was clearly the sort of person with whom you'd know it was worth investing much of your life.

The closing words of a hymn written during the social crisis 160 years ago keeps running through my head: "And a glad sound comes with the setting sun, 'Well done, well done.'" Thank you, Hal Harrison." - David Travers

"Hal gave so much of himself to the Vermont Conference. He was my Spiritual Director for about 25 years. I remember saying to my husband after Hal and I had met several times, I always enjoy being with Hal, but I'm not sure what this is accomplishing!" Little did I know. Our first grandchild was born with no quality of life, and eight years later, when Patrick died, I read out loud from my journals, as my

husband drove us out to our daughter's, about my conversations with Hal over that time, and realized, in retrospect, how profoundly he had helped me through that time. I had already realized by then how he had also, ever-so-gently helped me see myself "as others see me," and to work on rough edges!

I've been privileged to know a lot of UCC ministers over the years, who were pretty savvy when it came to Biblical scholarship, but I don't think I have ever known anyone who was as passionate about prayerfully interpreting the Bible or who knew it so well; it was his living friend. I appreciated Hal as my VAST teacher for New and Old Testament, and when I was serving the Sharon Church, as its Licensed Pastor, Hal came to us, at one point, once a week for six weeks to present what amounted to a college course that could have been named The Bible, 101; I still have the notes, and they are well-worn!

And there were the wonderful Advent Days at Atkinson House for many years – a peaceful renewing oasis in Advent for me, as a busy pastor. I am saddened not to have seen Hal for several years, and would love to say to him, "Well done, Good and Faithful Servant; you have enriched the spiritual life of so many of us, with your gentle non judgmental way. Thank you, dear Hal!" -Betty Edson

"Hal was my most formative teacher when I attended VAST. Later, when I became an authorized minister, Hal continued to mentor me. For two years, I sent him a copy of every sermon I preached, and he carefully, lovingly, and thoroughly critiqued each one, sending me back his written thoughts. He once said to me with a smile that my sermons would be more memorable if I didn't try to preach three sermons in one wrapper. I am a passable preacher today, and I shudder to think what might have happened without his counsel." -Rev. Jim Thomas

"My primary memories of Hal grow out of our shared experience in the Vermont Academy of Spiritual Training. We served together on the committee that created VAST and then after it was formed, Hal served as Dean and I as a teacher of biblical studies. Hal had a deep commitment to the spiritual and intellectual growth of lay persons and that commitment found a vibrant incarnation in the VAST program, through which I think hundreds of Vermonters in UCC churches and beyond deepened their discipleship. Hal was a caring and understanding dean and I always enjoyed so much just being with him and exploring ideas. We kept in touch after I left VAST and I am grateful we had a chance to be together at a meeting just before the pandemic made visiting in person difficult. Hal was also VERY supportive of my late wife, Shirley's, journey through ordination and her ministry at the Guilford Community Church. A wonderful person whom I remember with much love and affection." —Larry Crockett





"Hal was my mentor and teacher for the Summer VBS program and later, a similar program that we ran in Haverhill NH. He was one of the gentlest souls I have ever known, and the kindest. He helped me stand up to a bully and simultaneously learn to understand the woundedness that led to his behavior. Hal taught me that God calls us into ministry just as we are, and preach out of our lived experience. His wisdom has enriched the whole of my life and my ministry and I am so grateful for his example. Now he is dancing with the angels." Rev. Leigh McCaffrey

"My remembrance of dear, dear Hal Harrison was as our VAST New Testament instructor. Hal had a way of opening up scripture so as to mesmerize and transport you to that place and time in his always wise and kind approach, sprinkled generously with laughter and terrific storytelling. He also was so supportive of me in the seminary application process and then followed up with sincere interest throughout seminary and the early years of my ministry. Hal's life was a tremendous blessing to so many of us!" - Rev. Kathy Clark

"I am a member of the Williston Federated Church and just read about the passing of Hal Harrison. Many years ago I believe Hal led a workshop about the teaching methods of Walter Wink's "Transforming Bible Study." I think the session was in Montpelier or Barre and my daughter Elizabeth Magill (now a pastor) attended with me. I have been teaching about the Parables of Jesus using that method for many years now; here in the Williston Fed. Church and also in several Methodist Churches where my husband Charlie served. I have always been thankful for having attended Hal's workshop. Follow the thread, Jesus taught his followers, who taught others, who taught Walter Wink, who taught Hal Harrison, who taught the Magills, who taught . . . and on and on! We are all connected." Ruth Magill, Williston, VT

"Thank You for letting us know about Hal. I just heard from him recently so am especially sad to know he is gone..... but so glad for HIM. Hal was assigned as my first mentor within the Conference during my first internship out of Harvard Divinity School in 1988. My daughter was less than a year old and he came to our home and was invariably delighted to see and have her there as we discussed the church and my work there. He was a bright shining light in my life—always supportive and encouraging—even when women were not yet frequently

licensed or ordained. I have enormous respect for him and am interminably grateful for his presence at that juncture and in my life, at my ordination and in the years since.

May your true and blessed servant depart in peace,
Rev. Lise Sparrow



"His face shone like the sun"

-Matthew 17:2

"V.A.S.T. class in the early 90's was an experience I will always treasure and among the grand teachers, Rev. Harrison stood out as a model of how "a faithful person may also ask questions, reconsider, turn again, and then again" as he led us through his courses. His smile, his really looking into your eyes and heart as if your answer to a question was important was a treasure. What a privilege to have learned from him. "Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter in to the joy of the Lord" seems written for him."

"Hal was a wonderful model of the faithful follower of Christ. Although not a clergyperson, I had many opportunities to observe him in action. He had one special skill that impressed. He could lure you to be on his side when he sensed you needed to be convinced of something. He could let his spectacles slide down his nose and look so innocent and vulnerable that you wanted to help him convince you. And he usually did." David Durfee

At almost 90 years Hal was still sharing his ministry even during this pandemic! He is Hal last October helping lead evening prayer at Havenwood Heritage Heights Retirement Community where he resided. [click here for video](#)



Though he may no longer be with us physically, his legacy lives on. May we continue to share his joy, wisdom, and inspiration.

If you would like to share a remembrance and help us celebrate his remarkable life, please [click here](#) to share your remembrances.



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