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### **Hopkins chaplain, activist was 'consummate humanist'**

By Liz F. Kay

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The Rev. Chester Wickwire, the chaplain emeritus of the Johns Hopkins University, poet and renowned civil rights activist who worked with black leaders to integrate a Baltimore County amusement park, died Sunday of complications of dementia at the Broadmead retirement community in Hunt Valley. He was 94.

"Dr. Wickwire was a consummate humanist and participated for the time he was here in every cause that had to do with racial justice," said the Rev. Marion C. Bascom, who worked together with him on civil rights causes for several decades.

"No one who knew Chester Wickwire thought of him as white or black," said Mr. Bascom, pastor emeritus of Douglas Memorial Community Church. "They thought of him as a totally human person."

Dr. Wickwire, known as Chet to everyone including his sons, was born on the frontier in Nebraska but moved to an east Colorado mining camp as a child.

He majored in history at Union College in Lincoln, Neb., where he met his wife, the former Mary Ann Herwick. The two married in 1937, when he graduated.

Raised a Seventh-day Adventist, Dr. Wickwire enrolled at Yale Divinity School, where he earned a bachelor's degree in divinity in 1946, specializing in Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic.

He started his doctorate of divinity at Yale in 1948 but was stricken with polio and was admitted to the paupers ward at a New Haven hospital, among black men, homeless men and others.

"I think the situation thereafter was one where he probably identified with anyone who needed help," said his son Jon Wickwire of Great Falls, Va.

"Chet was for anybody that needed a helping hand, whether that was the black community or the



Korean community or Central Americans," his son added.

An acquaintance of his was connected to Eleanor Roosevelt, who got him a place at Warm Springs, Ga., for rehabilitation. From that point on, Dr. Wickwire used crutches.

Lacking funds to finance his degree, he sold spring-mounted toy rocking horses known as Wonder Horses.

After earning his doctorate, Dr. Wickwire moved to Baltimore in 1953 to work at Hopkins. He was a United Church of Christ (Congregationalist) minister.

"He did not want to be restricted to a particular dogma," said his son C. Lynn Wickwire of Cambridge, Mass.

Mr. Bascom said Dr. Wickwire was responsible for the admission of some of the first black undergraduates to Hopkins. He identified a handful of talented black high school students, Mr. Bascom's nephew among them, and introduced them to the Hopkins admissions staff.

He was also one of the first Hopkins faculty members to bring black guests to lunch at the faculty club, Mr. Bascom said.

Ralph Moore, a member of the early classes of African-Americans admitted to Hopkins, took a course with Dr. Wickwire every semester during his college career.

"I became a groupie in those years," Mr. Moore said.

Now director of a community center at St. Frances Academy, Mr. Moore participated in a tutorial project Dr. Wickwire created for a class titled "The Disadvantaged Child."

The program was designed to both teach children in poor neighborhoods but also expose Hopkins students to people of different racial and economic backgrounds, Mr. Moore said.

Dr. Wickwire later hired Mr. Moore as an assistant while he was president of the ministerial alliance.

The other ministers "always held him in very high regard because he was with them," Mr. Moore said. "They were all in this social change thing together. There was great mutual admiration and respect."

"He lived by his conscience and he did what he thought was right," Mr. Moore said. As a result, officials in City Hall and Hopkins' administration couldn't rely on him to be a team player, Mr. Moore said.

Mr. Bascom described Dr. Wickwire as quiet and persistent.

"I don't think I ever heard the man raise his voice," even amid moments of high tension and passion, Mr. Bascom said.

The two men went to jail together a few times in the 1960s as they fought for the integration of Gwynn Oak Amusement Park in Baltimore County.

Dr. Wickwire also accompanied dozens of black leaders to meet with Gov. Spiro T. Agnew after Baltimore's 1968 race riots and was among those who walked out in disgust as the governor blamed the black leadership for the disorder.

He was the first and only white president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, a organization of predominantly black ministers that was active during the civil rights movement.

In 1978, Dr. Wickwire became a strong advocate for academic freedom in Central America, later leading faculty trips to the University of El Salvador, said Lynn Wickwire.

Retired Baltimore City Circuit Judge Elsbeth L. Bothe took two of those trips to meet with revolutionary leaders there, she said.

"If anyone was an underdog, Chester was there," Judge Bothe said.

According to news reports, he had been accused of being an atheist, a communist and a rabble-rouser. His son Lynn remembered learning in 1962 that his father had been arrested in Moscow for distributing anti-Soviet literature after a New York Times reporter called to inquire about the incident.

"He wanted to be out there and was out there on the front line," his son said.

His wife described him as having an enormous amount of energy, rarely coming home before 9 p.m. each evening, in addition to working weekends. He was sometimes called "Chet the Jet."

"He had an enormous amount of energy, and it was terrible when he couldn't get out of bed," Mrs. Wickwire said.

His son Jon described his father as "a courageous man, a fighter."

Dr. Wickwire had written all his life but focused on poetry after he retired in 1984. The minister had published two books of poetry and was working on a third, Mrs. Wickwire said.

A memorial service will be held in October, Mrs. Wickwire said.

In addition to his wife and sons, Dr. Wickwire is survived by his brother, Bruce Wickwire of Chattanooga, Tenn.; another son, Brian Wickwire of McAllen, Texas; four grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren.

Baltimore Sun reporter Sara Neufeld contributed to this article.

**dateline**

1913: Chester Wickwire is born in Nebraska

1937: Graduates from Union College in Lincoln, Neb.

1946: Earns the first of two degrees from Yale Divinity School and is ordained in the United Church of Christ

1948: Hospitalized in a paupers ward for treatment of polio

1953: Moves to Baltimore, becoming executive secretary of the Levering Hall YMCA and chaplain of the Johns Hopkins University

1962: Detained in Russia along with Johns Hopkins exchange students for alledgedly spreading anti-Soviet literature

1963: Founds the Tutorial Project for urban youth who are tutored in reading and math by Hopkins students; jailed for nonviolent protest to desegregate Gwynn Oak Amusement Park

1970: As chairman of the Baltimore Committee for Political Freedom, calls on city and state authorities to improve conditions in the inner city after confrontations between police and residents linked to a crackdown on the Black Panthers

1975: As president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, calls on Gov. Marvin Mandel to end "illegal and immoral activity" of the state police spy squad

1977: As co-chairman of a citizens committee, supports a labor boycott of J.P. Stevens & Co. for its anti-union actions

1980: Supports the "Long Walk for Survival" by Native Americans, including a rally at Hopkins

1982: Supports rights of migrant workers in Maryland as chairman of a panel advising the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

1984: Retires as Hopkins chaplain

1990: Makes one of a decade-long series of trips to Central America to oppose political oppression

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