

Krister Stendahl, 86, Ecumenical Bishop, Is Dead

By Douglas Martin, New York Times, April 16, 2008

Krister Stendahl, a former dean of the Harvard Divinity School and a bishop in Sweden whose scholarship opened new ways of interpreting the Apostle Paul and whose activism pushed churches toward unity and tolerance, died on Tuesday in Boston. He was 86.

His wife, Brita, confirmed his death.

As a religious leader with the World Council of Churches and other bodies, Dr. Stendahl, a Lutheran, fought for the ordination of women and gay men and lesbians and against the use of sexist language in Scriptures, saying that Jesus' maleness was no more significant than the color of his eyes.

Dr. Stendahl pushed Christians toward ecumenism, not only among denominations, but also with other religious traditions. He urged believers to find beauty in other faiths, a phenomenon he called "holy envy."

"In the eyes of God, we are all minorities," he said in an interview with The Tulsa World in 2003. "That's a rude awakening for many Christians, who have never come to grips with the pluralism of the world."

As dean of the Harvard Divinity School from 1968 to 1979, he followed his own advice by transforming it into a more diverse institution. The women among the divinity students so appreciated his support that they called him "Sister Krister."

As bishop of the Diocese of Stockholm in the 1980s, he challenged members of the Church of Sweden — many of whom had come to see the church as a place only for rituals like baptisms and funerals — to ponder whether "they should be members of the church at all." He accelerated the process that ended the Swedish government's sponsorship of the church.

Dr. Stendahl combined deep research into the Old and New Testaments to question whether Paul was a Hamlet-like figure wrestling with questions of conscience, the prevailing view since at least the time of Martin Luther.

Instead, he argued that Paul, rather than expressing any inner conflict, had dealt with profound theological problems concerning Jewish law and the meaning of sin. Dr. Stendahl presented this new interpretation at a 1961 meeting of the American Psychological Association, saying that the idea of an angst-ridden Paul had been foreign to the first three centuries of the church.

"What he aimed to do was, in effect, to rescue Paul from the psychoanalytic couch," Thomas G. Long wrote in the theological journal *Interpretation* in 2004.

Garry Wills, in his 2006 book “What Paul Meant,” wrote that Dr. Stendahl had helped transport readers “back into the Spirit-haunted, God-driven world of Paul in the heady first charismatic days of Jesus’ revelation.”

Krister Olofson Stendahl was born on April 21, 1921, in Stockholm, where his father, Olof, worked as a harbor administrator. The family did not attend church, because, his father explained, the building was “very drafty,” Ms. Stendahl said. Krister’s teenage rebellion was to go to church.

He did not have a “born again” sort of religious awakening, his wife said. Rather, his faith grew out of extremely painful arthritis in his spine that started when he was 16 or 17. While traveling to other countries for treatments and spas, he learned several languages, including German.

His pain informed his religious readings; he meditated on Jesus’ pain, his wife said. But he brought humor and intellect to his reading. In an article in 2007 called “Why I Love the Bible,” he wrote that he had learned to “argue with God,” saying that in Jewish and biblical tradition this was the proper relationship.

Dr. Stendahl earned his doctorate from Uppsala University in Sweden, writing his dissertation on the Dead Sea Scrolls, the biblical-era writings found in Jordan in 1947. In 1954, Harvard hired him to teach New Testament studies. In the early 90s, after retiring as bishop, he taught Christian studies at Brandeis.

In addition to his wife of 61 years, the former Brita Johnsson, Dr. Stendahl, who lived in Cambridge and Nantucket, Mass., is survived by his sons John, of Newton, Mass., and Dan, of Ipswich, Mass.; his daughter, Anna Langenfeld of Middleborough, Mass.; eight grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

In an interview with The New York Times in 1974, Dr. Stendahl rejected Christians’ emphasis on life after death as “selfish” and as absent from Judaism and early Christianity. But life on other planets was another story.

In an interview with National Public Radio in 1996, he expressed the hope that life exists on Mars. If so, he said, “God would be bigger than we thought.”