



Frederick Nile Harper

September 29, 1931 - May 9, 2025

Frederick Nile Harper (Nile) Obituary

North Oaks, MN - The Harper family mourns the passing of Reverend Dr. F. Nile Harper on Friday May 9th, at Regions Hospital in St. Paul. A massive stroke followed by a 10-day family vigil concluded a long and exemplary life, whose peak moments were always in the service of others.

Born in 1931 to Frederick and Pearl Harper, he grew up in Muncie, Indiana, in a loving family that endured the lean years of the Great Depression and World War II. Extended family provided opportunities to flourish, and the Methodist Church helped instill lifelong values of hard work, tenaciousness, community spirit and Christian ethics.

Nile studied at Ball State Teachers College, where he met and wooed his life partner, Judith Ann Heuss. On graduation in 1952, he was confronted by an Army Draft Notice for the Korean War. This was a pivotal moment when, as a conscientious objector, he turned to a life in Christian ministry and the advocacy of peaceful solutions to conflict.

That pivot led to a Divinity degree at McCormack Seminary in Chicago. Nile then proposed to and married Judith, and the couple moved to Lansing, MI. There he became the Christian Youth Education program director at 1st Presbyterian Church. Two sons were born, Brian Nile and Steven Frederick.

In 1960, his pulpit advocacy for equal racial access to housing in Lansing led to eviction of his own family from their rental accommodation. This was the first of many hard knocks he faced when putting his faith into action.

In 1961 the family moved to NYC, where he earned Master's degrees at New York Theological Seminary and the New School for Social Research in Religious Education and Sociology. He followed that with a PhD in Education from Columbia University. A third son, Jay Marshall, was born but tragically died at the age of six. Publications and seminary teaching positions followed in the crucible of his career as a Christian Educator and social activist. In 1971, closure of New York Theological Seminary proved another difficult moment.

Rather than take an intriguing but risky role at Beirut University in Lebanon, he chose the security of the Midwest and moved his family to Iowa for an ecumenical teaching role at the Theological Seminaries of Dubuque. In Dubuque he created an Ecumenical Center where a blend of Catholic, Lutheran, and Presbyterian students lived together and engaged with the local community in service. Successive roles in Iowa serving churches (Cedar Rapids), and Presbyterian Church governance (Presbytery of East Iowa) finally led to another pivotal moment. When his wife Judith's career took a quantum leap, he announced it was her time to lead and followed her to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. There he served as the Ecumenical Campus Minister. A capstone project in this role was planning and fundraising to build a modern Ecumenical center with housing for international students. This building was completed shortly before his retirement in 1996.

In retirement Nile pursued his passion for supporting his grandchildren, writing books, electing Democrats, working within the Presbyterian General Assembly and supporting innumerable social causes locally and around the world. Nile traveled extensively in these pursuits including to the Middle East, the Soviet

Union, Europe, Cuba, South Korea and the Philippines. In 2004 he and Judith moved to the Twin Cities to be closer to family. He started Urban Church Research and traveled extensively in the US visiting urban churches. This led to the publication of two books, "Urban churches - Vital Signs" and "Journeys into Justice".

In 2020, his wife of 65 years passed away from ALS and he began his last book, to be published posthumously, which he informally referred to as excerpts from his "School of Hard Knocks."

Nile was a courageous man of strong convictions, a loving brother, husband and parent; a man of peace, who nonetheless confronted social injustice with direct action and Christian understanding. He will always be remembered as a passionate preacher, dedicated teacher and tireless organizer.

He is survived by his sister Jane, sons Brian (Cindy) and Steven (Sabine), four grandchildren Jay (Alex), Katrina (Dave), Max (Akira) and Alek and numerous nieces and nephews. All will miss his uplifting spirit, the unquestioning support, the motivational "Rise Up Sally Forth!", and celebratory "Hip Hip Hoorays!" we received from him.

A memorial service will be held on Monday May 19th at Westminster Presbyterian Church, 1200 Marquette Ave in Minneapolis at 11 AM. Underground parking is available off of Alice Rainville Place between Nicollet Mall and Marquette Avenue. There will be a visitation the hour before the service (10 AM) and a reception following. A livestream of the service will be available on the church's website at www.westminstermpls.org/worship/livestream/.

Tribute Wall

AP

“ Dear Brian and Steve Harper Families,

My heart is deeply saddened as I finally found Nile's sad news, after losing contact # for over one year. Please accept my sincere condolences to this loss of both you, myself, and all people he had cared about! Over decades, I cannot forget that he offered me a check for my dental care at the UM, when I was a poor student without any resources from the school and any relatives! He knew that I have struggled for years to pay my tuition and living by taking two jobs all year long! I later contributed to the center building with my early real salary after graduation, which was a surprise for him. I am not surprised by this sad news, but we should celebrate his remarkable life in this delayed response. I consider Nile as a dear friend and Godfather-like elderly, as Judy as a Godmother. I would remember forever the warm relationship and three time stays at their three homes. I knew her final condition that could kill anybody much sooner. But, Nile is such a great fighter, survivor, and model for all of us. Both of them will live in my heart with their smiles! Wish they are now at peace next to God in Heaven! Thanks for their long presence in my life during my critical decades here on the earth!

Sincerely,

Amy L. Ai, PhD, FSU, amyai8@gmail.com

Amy L Ai, PhD - March 20 at 11:33 AM