

Interfaith leader, Baptist pastor Welton Gaddy dies at 81

June 9, 2023

WASHINGTON (RNS)—C. Welton Gaddy, a Baptist pastor who became an advocate for interfaith relations and progressive causes, died June 7. He was 81.

The Interfaith Alliance—where Gaddy served as president from 1997 to 2014—announced Gaddy died in his home in Monroe, La.

“Welton stood as a source of inspiration to many,” the statement from the Interfaith Alliance read. “He showed us that it was possible to hold on to our faith while also fighting for the rights of others who did not share our religious tradition.”



C. Welton Gaddy

Growing up in Tennessee, Gaddy went to Union University there before attending Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where he earned a master's and a Ph.D.

He went on to become a Southern Baptist minister, serving with the Southern Baptist Convention Christian Life Commission and as pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth. He also served on the SBC Executive Committee.

When the SBC moved sharply to the right, Gaddy helped to found the Alliance of Baptists in 1987 as a progressive alternative. He also served on the general council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

In addition to his ministry, Gaddy also threw himself into the public sphere. He was president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State before taking leadership of the Interfaith Alliance, where he remained 16 years until his retirement.

While leading the Interfaith Alliance, he also was senior pastor of Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La., until 2016 and pastor emeritus until his death.

Gaddy was a frequent critic of the religious right throughout the 1990s. He told Religion News Service he fashioned the Interfaith Alliance to demonstrate Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and others, who he said had “co-opted” the language of religious freedom, “don’t represent all Christians.” Indeed, Gaddy often sparred with Falwell and Robertson—the founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network who also died this week.

Gaddy also voiced opposition to government-endorsed prayer and once served on a White House task force focused on “making the (White House faith-based) office constitutional,” despite telling officials at the time “You know, I still want it closed.”

He also organized in support of hate-crimes legislation and railed against the mistreatment of Muslims and Jews, once helping organize a ceremony at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to apologize on behalf of Baptist Christians for sins of “complicity” and “silence” regarding theology

used to justify the oppression of Jewish people during the Holocaust.

“It was my privilege to know the man, not just the pastor or the public figure,” Rabbi Jack Moline, an emeritus president of Interfaith Alliance, said.

“In my Jewish tradition, we respond to a loss like this with the prayer, ‘May his memory be a blessing.’ It is and will continue to be.”

Gaddy, who hosted a regular “State of Belief” radio show that later became a podcast, was known for elevating religious voices in support of same-sex marriage and LGBTQ Christians.

“It does not go without notice that we are remembering Welton just as the LGBTQ+ community is celebrating Pride Month,” said Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, Interfaith Alliance’s president.

“Welton wrote about full inclusion and dignity for LGBTQ+ people long before many other religious leaders. Across so many areas, Welton used his platform to project a vision for America that was inclusive of different beliefs and respectful of every individual’s inherent dignity.”

Gaddy is survived by his wife, Judy, as well as his son James and two grandsons. Another son, John Paul, died in 2014.

The Alliance of Baptists issued a statement celebrating the life of the group’s foundational leader, calling him “an integral member of a small group of Baptists who were committed to ensuring that all Baptists were not synonymous with fundamentalism.”

Gaddy may be gone, the statement said, but his legacy of forging a different vision for his Christian faith, as well as preaching respect for others, will endure.

“We will continue the work that he started,” the statement read.

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp.