

Red Letter Christian Tony Campolo dead at age 89

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(RNS)—Tony Campolo, an American Baptist minister and sociologist who spent decades trying to convince evangelicals and other Christians that their faith should motivate them to address social ills like poverty and racism, has died. He was 89.



Tony Campolo speaks at Wild Goose Festival 2019. (Video screen grab)

A native of Philadelphia, Campolo was known for his charismatic preaching and sense of humor, which made him a popular speaker at college campuses, churches and Christian conferences—and equally at home giving an altar call or social commentary.

“Putting religion and politics together is like mixing ice cream with horse manure,” he told the comedian and television host Stephen Colbert in 2006. “It doesn’t hurt the horse manure; it ruins the ice cream. And I think that this merger of church and state has done great harm to religion.”

The author of 35 books, Campolo held degrees from Eastern University, Palmer Theological Seminary and Temple University. He taught sociology first at the University of Pennsylvania and then for decades at Eastern

Christian College, where he was named professor emeritus.

He also served as an associate pastor at Mount Carmel Baptist, a predominantly Black church in Philadelphia, and in 2019 was named a co-pastor of St. John's Baptist.

Inspired young people to be world changers

Starting in the 1980s, with books such as *It's Friday but Sunday's Comin'*, *A Reasonable Faith*, *Who Switched the Price Tags* and *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*, Campolo showed a knack for reaching young people with the Christian gospel and then inspiring them to go out and work to change the world. In the process, he often challenged the religious right.

In 1985, he lost a speaking gig at Youth Congress, a national event in Washington, D.C., after critics complained his book *A Reasonable Faith* was heretical. A panel of evangelical theologians then “determined that Tony Campolo cannot rightly be called a heretic,” according to *Christianity Today*.

He eventually became a spiritual adviser to then-President Bill Clinton in the 1990s. Campolo also founded a nonprofit called the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education, which worked in several countries, including Haiti, from the early 1970s to 2014.

Ryan Burge, a former American Baptist pastor and an associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University, said Campolo carried forward the legacy of the social gospel.

“Tony Campolo was one of the most talented and sought-after preachers in the United States for several decades. He was able to speak to audiences from all corners of American Christianity—reminding them of the radical

grace and forgiveness that is found in the gospel,” Burge said.

Passion for justice rooted in early family life

The child of Italian American immigrants, Campolo said his belief that Christianity could change lives in this world—as well as saving people’s souls—grew out of his childhood.

In a 2016 online interview, he told the story of how a Baptist mission changed the course of his family’s life.

“My father couldn’t find a job and they were totally impoverished, and a Baptist mission in South Philadelphia reached out to them, got my father a job, got them a place to stay, put their feet on solid ground and really saved them from despair and destitution,” he recalled.

“People often ask me: ‘Where did you get your social consciousness? Where did you get your commitment to the poor, before it was ever fashionable?’ My mother and father saw in the way they were treated by a group of Baptists that this is what Christianity is about. It’s not about getting a ticket to heaven, it’s about becoming an instrument of God to transform this world.”

In 2007, Campolo, along with author and activist Shane Claiborne, founded Red Letter Christians, a challenge to the conservative evangelical voting bloc. The name came from the practice of Bible publishers printing the words of Jesus in red ink and highlighted the social and ethical teachings of Jesus. In 2012, Campolo was given a lifetime award from the National Youth Workers Convention for his work inspiring young people.

“As a result of Tony’s life of ministry and leadership he has left a legacy of encouragement and hope to youth workers and students everywhere,” the

award read, according to an official bio of Campolo.

Campolo suffered a stroke in 2020, which partially paralyzed his left side. He suffered a previous stroke in 2002.

“You’d be hard-pressed to find someone who has influenced evangelicalism more than Tony Campolo in the last 50 years,” Claiborne told RNS at the time.

Campolo is survived by his wife Peggy, son Bart and daughter Lisa.