

The New York Times

Robert Wood, 95, Dies; Urged Christian Acceptance of Gay People



The Rev. Robert Wood in an undated photo. His book “Christ and the Homosexual,” published in 1960, was a rare plea by a gay clergyman for equality.

By **Richard Sandomir**

Aug. 28, 2018

The Rev. Robert W. Wood, who boldly urged Christian clergymen in a 1960 book to welcome gay men and women to their churches in a time of widespread prejudice against them, and went on to march in early gay-rights protests, died on Aug. 19 at his home in Concord, N.H. He was 95.

Rejean Blanchette, a friend who helped care for Mr. Wood in recent years, confirmed the death.

Mr. Wood’s book “Christ and the Homosexual” was a rare plea by a gay clergyman for equality at a time when local and state laws criminalized the sexual acts of gay, lesbian and bisexual people, and churchmen condemned homosexuality from their pulpits.

Mr. Wood was a United Church of Christ minister in Spring Valley, N.Y., when he decided to write the book. He was reluctant at first, believing there were others more qualified. But when no one else wrote such a book, he borrowed against his life insurance policy to pay for the publication of a few thousand copies by a vanity press.

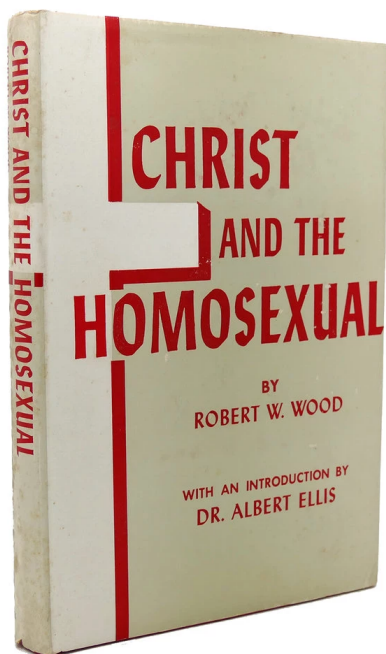
Blending social science and cultural analysis with his experiences ministering to closeted gay men, Mr. Wood made a powerful appeal for the full acceptance of gay people by churches and American society.

“The yardstick for Christian behavior is always: What would Jesus Christ do in this situation?” he wrote.

Christ’s teachings made the answer obvious to Mr. Wood, who concluded that the “saving message of Christ and the freely flowing grace of God are as much for the homosexual as the heterosexual,” and that “the church must minister equally to both; that the demands of Christ apply to both; that both are capable of being moral, as well as immoral and amoral.”

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Mr. Wood’s book came well before the gay-rights movement gained traction with critical moments like the riots at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in 1969. But “Christ and the Homosexual” did not make much of a ripple outside of largely positive reviews in gay publications and the granting of an award of merit to Mr. Wood by the Mattachine Society, an early gay-rights organization.



Mr. Wood borrowed against his life insurance policy to pay for the publication of a few thousand copies of “Christ and the Homosexual.”

Rare Book Cellar

There were several reasons for the book's lack of impact, according to Bernard Schlager, a professor of historical and cultural studies at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, Calif. In a 2015 article for the journal *Theology & Sexuality*, Mr. Schlager said a lack of promotion for the book led to a lack of reviews in major publications; gay men and women were still largely invisible to mainstream society in the early 1960s; and Christian denominations were still a decade or so from forming advocacy groups that educated church members about homosexuality.

But he suggested a fourth reason: Mr. Wood did not out himself in the book. In fact, he would not do so until he retired as a pastor in 1986, although he lived openly for many years with his partner, Hugh Coulter, a former rodeo cowboy and artist, at parishes in Spring Valley, Newark and Maynard, Mass.

"Perhaps had he written as an 'out' gay author who spoke openly from his own experiences," Mr. Schlager wrote, "the book may have attracted a wider readership."

Mr. Wood was at ease with his decision to remain quiet about his sexuality.

"We chose not to 'out' ourselves but to live our lives as a caring, loving couple and let parishioners and everyone else accept us as they found us," he said in an interview in 2007 for a 50th-anniversary book published by the United Church.

Mr. Coulter died in 1989. Mr. Wood leaves no survivors.

Robert Watson Wood was born in Youngstown, Ohio, on May 21, 1923, to Harold and Edith (Beard) Wood. His father was an electrical engineer, his mother a homemaker.

Mr. Wood left the University of Pennsylvania to fight in World War II in North Africa and Italy with the 36th Infantry division. He was wounded in battle — earning a Bronze Star and other medals — and spent nearly two years recovering. After being discharged, he completed his bachelor's degree at the University of Pennsylvania and later graduated from the Oberlin School of Theology in Ohio.

He encountered prejudice in school and the military. In an interview in 2000 for an Oberlin L.G.B.T. history project, he recalled a meeting with fellow undergraduates who frightened him by quoting negative Scripture verses about homosexuals.

"I realized they were using these texts to bash me and other homosexuals," he said, "so I decided that when I went to seminary, I would learn my Bible as well as or more than they did so I could use Scripture to confront them."

He was ordained in 1951 and joined the staff of the Broadway Tabernacle in Manhattan before becoming pastor at the First Congregational Church (now the United Church) of Spring Valley. While there, he wrote an article in 1956 called "Spiritual Exercises" for a gay physique magazine

that prompted letters from “men frustrated at having to hide their gayness in order to keep their Christian faith.”



Mr. Wood in the 2001 documentary “Gay Pioneers.”
via Equality Forum

That, in turn, helped him formulate the simple basis for his book: that it was O.K. to be a gay Christian even if your church disagreed.

Within a few years he had turned his attention to more overt activism. He protested in Washington in June 1965 against anti-homosexual hiring practices by the federal government. Soon after, on July 4, he was in Philadelphia with a small group of gay and lesbian protesters who gathered outside Independence Hall, connecting the promise of constitutional equality to the gay civil rights movement.

It was the first of five protests at Independence Hall through July 4, 1969, that came to be known as the Annual Reminders.

“The fact that he was willing to to use his name and appear in his clerical collar was astounding,” Malcolm Lazin, executive director of the Equality Forum, an L.G.B.T. rights group, said in a telephone interview. “He was putting his job on the line by virtue of his willingness to appear in public at these protests.”

Mr. Wood kept his job, ministering quietly to his parishioners, as gay rights advanced on an arc that almost certainly could not have been predicted when he wrote “Christ and the Homosexual.” In his advocacy of same-sex marriage, he wrote that he would insist that any gay couple enter premarital counseling with him before he would agree to officiate at their wedding.

He did not think at the time that many gay couples would want to marry. But, he wrote, “to say without reservation that homosexual marriages are immoral and should not be sanctioned by the clergy is to sacrifice the homosexual upon the altar of the status quo.”

Decades later, he officiated at same-sex marriages when they became legal in Massachusetts and then, New Hampshire, where he had moved after his retirement. Mr. Blanchette’s wedding to Robert Paradis was the last such union performed by Mr. Wood.

“It was in our backyard, with probably 35 people there,” Mr. Blanchette said in a telephone interview. “He did refer briefly to his history, but he didn’t want the spotlight to be on him.”

He added: “He just wanted people to know that gay people are just like everybody else. We just have a different sexual orientation.”

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 29, 2018, on Page A21 of the New York edition with the headline: Robert Wood, a Minister Who Urged Gay Rights for 6 Decades, Dies at 95