



John Davison Dennis

September 18, 1937 - September 4, 2019

“...And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with your God...” Micah 6:8

The Reverend John Davison Dennis passed away peacefully on September 4th, 2019, surrounded by family. In his time, he touched thousands of lives across our fragile planet - in good times and bad - worked tirelessly for social justice, extended compassion, and was always there for family, especially his wife of 52 years, Nancy Schumacher, who passed away five months before he did.

Born in 1937 to John Wellington and Helen Davison Dennis, John grew up in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill. A nationally ranked tennis and squash champion at Shadyside Academy and Wesleyan University, John was active in campus leadership and planned to return to the family's business after graduation. Then, his senior year, plans changed dramatically when the Director of the Honors College, who had famously stood up to Joseph McCarthy, pulled him aside and challenged him to live his life dedicated to others. Shortly afterwards, John enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary.

John and Nancy were married in St. Louis in 1967, and two years later moved to Corvallis, Oregon where John was called to be the Senior Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. Over the next four decades there, he and Nancy raised their two sons and a succession of questionably behaved West Highland White Terriers.

The pastoral care he quietly provided spanned generations: baptisms,

weddings, interventions, counseling, funerals, hospital visits, celebrations. Every late-night phone call was answered. He was a spiritual shepherd and deliverer of hope to a much-loved congregation and community. John had special gifts of being there when it mattered most and of connecting with people in a personal way without judgment or reservation. The new Dennis Hall at First Presbyterian Church in Corvallis stands in honor to all he and Nancy gave to the community.

To do justice, he relocated his family to South Africa in 1978. There, he contributed to the Sullivan Principles, which directed economic pressure on South Africa to help end apartheid, plus was detained in Algoa Park Prison where Steven Biko had been killed months earlier. In ensuing years, John led peacemaking trips to the Middle East, Northern Ireland, and “Iron-Curtain”-era USSR. The latter trip with the church choir included a visit to Corvallis’ sister city, Uzhgorod, Ukraine; John was a leader in establishing the Corvallis Sister Cities Association.

True to his Eagle Scout heritage, John was active in many community organizations - including the Corvallis Rotary, Madison Avenue Task Force, and Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon - and in 1988 he ran for U.S. Congress. A visit to Cambodia in 1994 with his college roommate led John to a life-long mission to help a country recovering from years of genocide, war, and landmines. His efforts provided over 2,000 prosthetic limbs for children whose arms and legs were lost to landmines.

John is survived by his loving sister Helen, his devoted sons Michael and Andrew, their wives Allison and Rebecca, and four grandchildren Leif, Harriet, Roselyn, and Frederic, who was born on John and Nancy’s 50th wedding anniversary.

His legacy and his challenge to us are reflected in a poem, which John recited often, by the Swiss philosopher Henri Frederic Amiel:

Life is short and we have not too much time
to gladden the hearts of those
who travel the way with us.

Oh, be swift to love.

Make haste to be kind.

A memorial service will be held at 1:00 p.m., Saturday, October 12, 2019, at The First Presbyterian Church, 114 S.W. 8th St., Corvallis, OR. In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts can be sent to Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO), an organization that held a special place in John's heart, bringing diverse communities of faith together to create a more just, compassionate, sustainable, and peaceful world. John served as board president and supported their mission to his last day: <https://emoregon.org>

Previous Events

Memorial Service

OCT **12**. 1:00 PM (PT)

First Presbyterian Church
114 SW 8th St
Corvallis, OR 97333

Tribute Wall

JD

“ Hi Michael and Andrew I just opened my phone to call your dad, which I have done every year for the past 5 or 6 years. I heard that the number was disconnected. I just realized that he may be gone. I just want to say I that I'm thinking about you and your families. Your Dad was an amazing man in my life especially when I was young. My mom and dad, Murray and Kathleen Dawson attended the 1st Presbyterian Church and so did all of their 6 kids. I always had a special place in my heart for your dad because we have the same initials, Jocelyn Diane Dawson. We kept in touch especially when my mom and dad aged, he would sometimes drive up to Bothell, Washington to visit them. I was always so amazed at how good he could remember the details of their lives and mine. Anyway I just want to let you know as I just found out today, April 29th and I'm sad but I'm so glad that I had the opportunity to know him. Take care, Sincerely Jocelyn

Jocelyn D'Ahmed - April 29, 2020 at 07:21 PM

CZ

“ Dear Michael and Andrew and family,
I write to offer condolences on the death of your mother and father. My family grew up in the First Presbyterian Church where your parents were leaders, and your father presided at my wedding in 1986 to Scott. He was always such a kind and steady person, a good listener but with a good sense of humor; well read but always looking at the practical ways to help. After I left home, and was living in another state, he still kept in touch. I was sorry to hear about his passing and of your mother, Nancy. Their love and care for others made an impact that continues blessing the world.
Sincerely,
Christine Novak and Scott Zetterberg

Christine Zetterberg - October 16, 2019 at 03:13 PM

JB

“ I was saddened to hear of John’s passing. We have lost a great man. Having grown up in Corvallis and regularly attending First Presbyterian Church, I saw John’s kindness, compassion and goodness. He would often ask me if there was anything he could do for me, to please let him know. My family and I were honored and pleased to have John be the minister when I got married to my wife Ann. He certainly touched a lot of lives. The church, Corvallis community, state of Oregon and the world will greatly miss him. He certainly left the world a better place. My condolences to the Dennis family.

Jon Bibler

Jon Bibler - October 13, 2019 at 02:07 PM

DC

“ Dear Dennis family - I am so sorry about the loss of John for your family and our greater community. I met John in the last 10 years through the Portland Rotary Club's Ethics in Business program, which produced an annual awards program honoring ethical businesses and non-profits in Oregon. John and I promoted participation in the program throughout the state. We traveled once to his Corvallis Rotary Club to speak and encourage nominations. I admired John's quiet but determined drive to support worthy causes. He also was supportive of my activities at the Providence St. Vincent Foundation. He was always seeking ways to help others. I value the memories of my times providing rides for him to his Portland home after meetings or sharing life perspectives after a Rotary evening function. He was always thoughtful, kind and engaging. His legacy will live on through all of those he touched. God bless you - Dick Clark of Portland

Dick Clark - October 11, 2019 at 12:45 AM

AA

“Helen, Michael, and Andrew: I am sorry to miss singing in the choir at John's service this weekend. I will be traveling to pay tribute to my sister who passed away. ...and this brings about special memories of John. He was so supportive when my husband, Tom, passed away and always remembered my sister and mother, even though they did not live in Corvallis. He was a 'people' person. A fun memory of mine was when John seemed to be lost in the Kremlin, and we sent Tom, in his red coat, to find John. Fortunately, both returned safely. May you experience support and peace through John's service and many wonderful comments from friends. The John Dennis Legacy at 1st Pres in Corvallis will live on forever.
Ann Asbell
Corvallis

Ann Asbell - October 07, 2019 at 01:50 PM

JB

“Dear Helen, Michael, and Andrew,

You have my sincere condolences on the passing of your brother and father. He was such a kind and compassionate soul who touched my life in many ways. He always had just the right and uplifting words for me when I was going through a tough time. And I saw how so many others were uplifted and inspired by his example, leadership, and unfailing kindness in all situations. I will miss him very much.

Sincerely,

Jeff Bibler

Jeff Bibler - October 06, 2019 at 03:10 PM

DB

“ *Helen, Michael, and Andrew,*

Please accept my deep condolences on the death of your brother and your father. He was a great man in every way and is greatly missed by all those who knew him. My family came to Corvallis the same year as yours, and my late wife Jean and I were in John's first membership class at First Pres. Again, my deepest sympathy

Darrel Bibler

Darrel Bibler - October 02, 2019 at 01:58 PM

PS

“ *I admired John for his wisdom and integrity. He taught me mercy and bestowed me with kindness in a time of need.*

Pete Sandrock

Pete Sandrock - September 29, 2019 at 06:48 PM

WK

“ *John and my father Lew Krakauer, a Jewish atheist, were strange bedfellows. They had in common though, strong squash playing skills, bright minds and a strong desire to make the world better. Through their friendship I got to know John and Nancy and along with most of my siblings, had the privilege of John officiating at my wedding. He will be missed but left behind a wonderful legacy. My condolences to the family.*

Wendy Krakauer

Wendy Krakauer - September 29, 2019 at 05:42 PM

JS

“ We first met John in his founding effort to establish Uzhgorod Ukraine as Sister City with Corvallis. Coincidentally we knew John as Senior Minister of the Presbyterian Church, and as a spiritual counselor.

John Dennis will be sorely missed.

John and Mary Dean Snelling

John Snelling - September 29, 2019 at 11:02 AM