

Introduction of Bill Alberts
Distinguished Alumni Awards
Boston University School of Theology
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By Rev. Scott Campbell

(Retired United Methodist Pastor, living in Western Maine. Served churches in Paris, France; Brussels, Belgium; and Cambridge, MA, where he taught for more than twenty years as an adjunct faculty member at Harvard Divinity School. He have been involved in a number of church trials as counsel for the defense when pastors have run afoul of the Church for reasons of conscience.)

Dear friends, I have been given three minutes to tell you a little bit about the Rev. Dr. William Alberts. I am not going to use this time to recapitulate what you can read of his impressive and distinguished record as pastor, prophet, counselor, chaplain, teacher and innovator in ministry. All that goes without saying and can be found elsewhere. Instead, I want to give you a glimpse or two into the impact that his life has had on one who has been taught, inspired and challenged by him.

In the fall of 1970, my second year at BUST, I found myself in a small field education group, facilitated by Bill. I reveled in my good fortune. Bill's ministry at Old West was already viewed by colleagues across the Southern New England Conference as a model of what it meant for the Church to live out the Gospel with authenticity and courage. In a few short years Bill had developed a dozen cutting edge ministries serving the poor, ministering to those who were at risk, and confronting the halls of power in government and commerce. At our first class session Bill shared a sermon with us. "The Word is more than words" he declared. I would come to understand just what he meant over the years that followed.

Bill's entire life has been marked by prophetic acts that have called the Church to risk its comfort, its status, its privilege and its security for the sake of the poor, the

downtrodden, the dispossessed and the marginalized. In his own words he would later write: *The test of being prophetic is that of speaking reality and moral truth to both political and religious power on behalf of the "Have Nots."* Bill was out in front before, in the words of James Russel Lowell, it was *prosperous to be just*. Decades before Massachusetts led the nation in legalizing gay marriage, Bill was performing such ceremonies for members of his community, risking and ultimately losing his standing in the Church to do what was right. The Word was more than words.

For five years after Bill's utterly illegal expulsion from active ministry in the United Methodist Church he was *persona non grata* in the places that had showered adulation on him a few short years before. He was unable to find work, he was forced into personal bankruptcy, and found himself largely ostracized from former colleagues. For many, if not most, enough would have been enough, but Bill did not give up on the Church or on his ministry. Like a Phoenix from the ashes, the Boston Community Church was born in 1978 and Bill was fellowshiped into the Unitarian/Universalist Association in 1982. In 1992, Bill became hospital chaplain at Boston Medical Center, where his heart for ministry to and with the poor flourished every day. For Bill Alberts prophetic ministry is legitimized by pastoral ministry. The Word is more than words.

For me, as the years have turned into decades, I have marveled as that prophetic witness, grounded in Bill's pastoral empathy, has grown sharper and sharper, and more and more challenging to those of us looking for less-costly discipleship. Whether the arena be politics, race, poverty, environment, war, economic exploitation, or a score of other affronts to justice, Bill's critique has grown more incisive, his passion for what is good more true, and his commitment to speak truth to power more consuming.

Some have wondered why the School of Theology would choose to honor one whose life has been marked by such controversy and conflict with those in authority. I do not. As a United Methodist I inherit the mantle of one who was booted out of the pulpits of the Church of England. As a Christian I claim the

name of one who was crucified for his words and deeds. I am proud to honor tonight a colleague and friend who has followed in the footsteps of these namesakes and who has lived a life that embodied what he taught me all those years ago—The Word is more than words.