

Epitaph

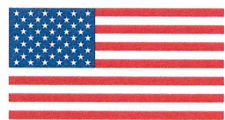
Don't fly the flag at half its mast
Or sing a dirge for me.
Don't drape the family plaque in black
If I should cease to be.
Don't tip-toe past my confined corpse
And blubber up your faces,
For I am leaving man's confines
For God's wide open spaces!

So run the flag up to the top
And fly it at the summit!
Pull out all the organ stops
And polish up the trumpet!
Raise your banners to the sky!
Sing out in celebration!
The boss just summoned me to be
Adviser to creation!

October 29, 1970

Dedicated to Rick Hartung, son of Ron and Faye
Hartung, who died in April, 1971

Rodney Gist



Rodney Raymond Gist

October 4, 1926

June 22, 2024

*Thirty-nine years of ministry in the
United Methodist Church
of the Dakotas*



Rodney Raymond Gist, aged 97, died Saturday, June 22nd, at Ava's Hospice House in Sioux Falls after a brief final illness. He was born on October 4, 1926, to Joseph and Gladys (Leffler) Gist on their family's farm near Presho, South Dakota. In 1937, when weather and economic conditions had made farming there impossible for them, he moved with his family first to a farm near Worthing, then to one near Madison, South Dakota, where his parents worked as tenant farmers. He attended rural public schools and Madison High School, from which he graduated in 1944. On graduation, he was drafted into the U.S.

Army and served in the Philippines at the end of World War II, primarily as a guard for Japanese prisoners of war who worked on the reconstruction of Manila. This experience, during which Rod learned to see the humanity of wartime enemies, convinced him that he wanted to devote his life to working for peace and reconciliation among people.

When Rod returned to civilian life in 1946, he used the welcome benefit of the GI Bill to attend General Beadle (now Dakota State University), the University of Iowa, and the University of South Dakota, from which he graduated in 1950. Through the influence of the Wesley Foundation at Iowa, Rod changed the focus of his study from pre-medicine to pre-theology on the strength of his belief that there is no point in making people well if they have nothing to live for. He enrolled at Garrett Theological Seminary in 1950. While in seminary, he met and courted, mostly by correspondence, musician and teacher Doris Leivestad, whom he married on June 15, 1953 – the same day he graduated from seminary. She preceded him in death on February 14, 2023, after nearly 70 years of marriage. Together they raised two daughters: Barbara and Linda.

Rod and Doris spent their working lives itinerating among United Methodist churches in South Dakota, where Rod served as pastor. Many of his appointments were to churches troubled by the distresses of declining populations or internal conflicts; in these churches, Rod did his best to fulfill his youthful resolve to be a peacemaker, and to live a life worthy of his calling. His most exotic – and probably most formative – appointment was to nine small churches in a Methodist circuit in and near Louth, Lincolnshire, England, where he served in an exchange with a British Methodist pastor from 1968-1969. During the year he and his family lived in England, Rod entertained his parishioners at home with a weekly newspaper column called "Life in England Filtered Through a Yankee."

Rod deeply loved the daily tasks of ministry and the people whom he served. He particularly loved working with young people, especially in church camps, for which he often counseled or served as dean. A fair number of youth with whom he worked chose Christian ministry as their own life's work, in part because of his influence.

A lodge at Storm Mountain Center in the Black Hills, for which he and Doris made a naming gift, stands as a testament to his faith in camping as a powerful means of opening the human heart to the grace of God.

Throughout his career, Rod received several honors and awards for his contributions to the communities in which he lived and worked, including an honorary doctorate from Dakota Wesleyan University to add to his earned Doctor of Ministry degree from McCormick Theological Seminary. But the honor he cherished most was the Lifetime Peace and Justice award of the Dakotas Conference of the United Methodist Church, which he received in 2012. And the professional accomplishment of which he was likely most proud was his service on the Clergy Observer Corps, which mediated the deadly clash between members of the American Indian Movement and the FBI at Wounded Knee in 1973. This group of clergy played a crucial role in de-escalating the armed stand-off between these groups.

Rod and Doris retired from itinerant ministry in 1989 and moved to Inwood, Iowa to care for Doris' mother and disabled sister. They remained active in church and community affairs in Inwood, as they did in Sioux Falls, to which they moved in 2002, when family needs no longer kept them in Inwood. For more than 20 years, they contributed to the ongoing ministries of First United Methodist Church as well as the work of other groups in whose mission they firmly believed, including The Banquet, Active Generations, and the Democratic Forum. Rod was profoundly happy to be asked to join a Midwest Honor Flight to Washington D.C. during his years in Sioux Falls, and frequently spoke of how moving that day was to him.

To every group, event, task, or pleasure to which Rod gave his attention, he brought an exuberant love of life, an undying sense of humor, and a seemingly bottomless compassion for the last, the least, and the lost for whom Christ had special tenderness. The world is richer for his long life.

Rod Gist is survived by his daughters, Barbara (David) Cook of Fennimore, Wisconsin and Linda (James) Marten of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; his grandchildren, Lauren (Matt) Parker of New York, New York and Eli Marten (partner Erika Olson) of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; his great-grandson, Wylie Parker of New York, New York; his nephews, John Gist, Kirby Spencer, and Lee Spencer; and his niece, Melissa Nelson. In addition to his wife Doris, he was preceded in death by his parents; his brother, Kent Gist; his sister, Ruth Spencer; his niece, Sarah Young; and many, many friends.