

OBITUARY
HALL-WYNNE FUNERAL SERVICE
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CHAPEL HILL – Robert Edward Seymour, Jr., was born in 1925 and was the only child of Janie Sproles Seymour and Robert Edward Seymour, Sr. of Greenwood, SC. His grandfather, James Sproles, and Rosa Cohen, a household employee, participated in his upbringing.

In his career as a clergyman, he served four churches in North Carolina, culminating in a three-decade ministry as the first pastor of The Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill. Seymour was active in the civil rights movement, and in his book, *Whites Only*, he describes how the racial issue was a defining theme of his professional career. A forthcoming documentary, “You Can’t Hold Back the Spring”, illuminates his life and ministry.

Acquiescing to his father’s wishes, he began his college education at The Citadel in Charleston, SC, where after a year he volunteered for the V-12 Program of the United States Navy in preparation for becoming a Navy Chaplain in World War II. He was sent to the unit at Newberry College and from there to Duke University. Following graduation, he became a midshipman and was transferred to Yale Divinity School from which he received a Bachelor of Divinity degree after the war ended. During his summers at Yale he served a United Church in Bruneau, Idaho, and Methodist Settlement Home in Ybor City, FL. He was awarded a scholarship to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland where he achieved a Ph.D. in Historical Theology.

His first assignment in ministry was on the staff of the Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte as Assistant to the Minister. From there he became the minister of the Warrenton Baptist Church in Warrenton. His next church was the Mars Hill Baptist Church adjacent to the campus of Mars Hill College. It was there that he met his wife, Pearl Francis, who was the organist at the church and who taught music on the college faculty. In 1958 he was called to become the first pastor of the new Baptist congregation in Chapel Hill where he remained until his retirement in 1988.

As the Pastor of Coach Dean Smith, he is credited with encouraging him to recruit the first Black basketball player to UNC. His church also persuaded Fred Ellis to run for the Chapel Hill/Carrboro School Board in order to cast the decisive vote for the integration of the Chapel Hill school system upon election. The congregation offered strong support for member Howard Lee when he ran successfully to become the first Black mayor of a Southern city elected by a White majority. Seymour was active in politics and was proud to be the Pastor of Congressman David Price, whom he had persuaded to attend Yale Divinity School after knowing him as a student at Mars Hill.

He was also active in the Baptist denomination. Before the Southern Baptist Convention was taken over by conservatives, he was a member of the Christian Life Commission. He led Binkley Church to become dually aligned with the former Northern Baptist Convention, now known as American Baptists. He was a founding member of the group that brought into being the American Baptist Churches of the South (ABCOTS), bringing together both Black and White congregations of the Southeastern region into the national denominational body.

Seymour was the author of five books, including *Whites Only* and *Aging without Apology* published by Judson Press. For more than a decade, he was a regular columnist for the *Chapel Hill News*, and those columns with the Letters to the Editor in response are collected in a volume titled *A Village Voice*. Two books, *Celebrating Christmas as Christians* and *When Life Becomes Worthwhile* are selections from his sermons. He had articles in *The Christian Century* and sermons published in several professional journals. He also became a regular columnist for the *Chapel Hill Herald*.

In his retirement years he was very active in issues related to the senior population. He served on the Board of Carol Woods Retirement Community, the Advisory Board of the Orange County Department on Aging, and the Board of Friends of Residents in Long Term Care. He was the founding president of Friends of the Chapel Hill Senior Center, which led to the building of a new Orange County facility named the Robert and Pearl Seymour Center. Orange County Habitat for Humanity named the first building of a new senior housing development in his honor.

Seymour served on many boards and agencies. He was a Trustee of Mars Hill College and of the North Carolina Symphony. He was the first president of the Interfaith Council for Social Services, serving as its leader for seven years. He was the first president of the Chapel Hill/Carrboro Public School Foundation. He was a member of the initial boards of the Chapel Hill/Carrboro YMCA, People of Faith against the Death Penalty, and Communities in Schools.

Other positions served by Seymour include the Chairmanship of the Social Service Commission of North Carolina Council of Churches, Chairman of the Peace Committee of the Council of Churches, the board of the International Visitor's Center, the Triangle United Way, the local and state boards of the American Civil Liberties Union, the review board of Triangle Community Foundation, the North Carolina Consumer Council, the North Carolina Editorial Forum, the Advisory Committee of Habitat for Humanity, and the national Boards of Visions. He also served on the Human Rights Committee of UNC Hospitals and Umstead Hospital and the Orange County Human Relations Commission. He was also appointed to the UNC Health Care board.

Among his many honors was an award from Yale Divinity School for "Distinction in Ordained Ministry." He received the George Maddox Award from the North Carolina Department of Human Resources for his work in aging issues. Locally,

he was given a Leadership Award by WCHL, the Outstanding Kiwanian Award, and the Jaycees Senior Citizen of the Year Award and the Community Makers Award from the Chapel Hill Herald. He was the recipient of Chapel Hill's Martin Luther King, Jr. Award and the Frank Porter Graham Award from the North Carolina ACLU. The Chapel Hill Historical Society named him as a Town Treasure. After his retirement, Binkley Church established the Seymour Symposium to take place every five years. A new chapel at Binkley Church honors the Seymours for their service in Chapel Hill.

His wife, Pearl, died in 2011. He is survived by two children, a son, Robert Edward Seymour, III and his wife Kelly of Raleigh; a daughter, Frances Jane Seymour and her husband Michael Kopetski of Washington, DC; grandchildren Leigh Seymour Comis, Robert Edward Seymour, IV, Macy Elizabeth Seymour, and Emme Grace Seymour; and great-grandchildren Cohen Edward Comis, Adeline Pearl Comis, and Ellison Elizabeth Seymour.

In lieu of flowers, gifts may be made the Interfaith Council, the Robert and Pearl Seymour Senior Center, the Binkley Baptist Church Endowment, or the Seymour Symposium Fund of Binkley Baptist Church.

The Seymour family is under the care of Hall-Wynne Funeral Service. Online condolences: www.hallwynne.com – select obituaries.