Rev. Carl Raymond Smith, Jr., 91, passed away on June 4, 2015 at Cathedral Village, a senior residence in Philadelphia, Pa., where he lived with his wife Mary Helen Lawson since 2004. He died peacefully after an extended illness, in the presence of his family.

Carl was a retired minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA), which he served in both pastoral and executive positions. From 1976 until his 1987 retirement, he served in Indianapolis, IN as the Synod Executive of the Synod of Lincoln Trails. He previously served as Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley in Rochester, NY (1968-1976); pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Jamaica, Queens, NY (1960-1968); visiting pastor with the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Nairobi, Kenya; associate pastor of Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church, Denver, CO (1954-1960), and pastor of the Hilltop Christian Church, a Disciples of Christ church in Columbus, OH (1950-1954).

Carl’s professional and religious education included degrees from Ohio State University, Columbus, OH (M.A. 1954), Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT (B.D. 1950), and Johnson Bible College, in Kimberlin Heights, TN (A.D., 1946). He also studied under the theologian Karl Barth at the University of Basel, Switzerland (1957) and with community organizer Saul Alinsky.

Carl was born on November 22, 1923, in Grants Pass, OR, and was raised in Kalispell, Montana, near Glacier National Park. His father Carl R. Smith Sr., was a World War I-era veteran (U.S. Army Signal Corps), and worked as a grocer, railwayman on the Great Northern Railroad, and, during the Great Depression, as a W.P.A. construction worker. His mother Silva Duncan Smith ran a boarding house in Kalispell, and later worked in an apple processing plant in Wenatchee, WA. His brother Irvin D. Smith served in the U.S. Navy during World War II on the U.S.S. New Jersey. He later received a law degree, and served for many years as the District Attorney of Harney County, OR.

Carl’s ministry was shaped by his lifelong passion for civil rights and social justice, his belief in religious tolerance and ecumenism, and compassion for the poor, powerless, and dispossessed. Throughout his life, he challenged the church, its lay leaders, and its clergy (including himself) to comply with Christ’s simple command to love one another.

Under his leadership in the 1960s, the First Presbyterian Church in Queens, NY, a racially diverse congregation, became actively involved in the civil rights movement. Carl organized a busload of church members to participate in the August 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where they heard Rev. Martin Luther King’s epic “I Have a Dream” speech. In 1964, Carl travelled with other ministers, priests, and rabbis to “Freedom Summer” in Hattiesburg, MS, to witness and support the registration of African American voters.

As Executive Presbyter in Rochester, Carl led a 31,000 member, 76 church governing body in upstate New York. As the Synod Executive in Indianapolis, he led the church judicatory overseeing the 270,000 member-strong churches of Indiana and Illinois. In both positions, he brought together Presbyterians of diverse racial, theological, and socioeconomic backgrounds in urban, suburban, and rural congregations.

His retirement was marked by a proclamation from the mayor of Indianapolis, declaring August 31, 1987 to be “Reverend Carl R. Smith Day,” and noting that “Reverend Smith has dedicated his life to the community, the church and most importantly the uplifting, preaching, and teaching of God’s word.” Recognizing his commitment to interfaith understanding, Carl’s colleagues also funded the “Carl R. Smith Fund” at Chicago’s McCormick Seminary, to establish a lectureship to further Jewish-Christian dialogue. After his retirement, Carl led a Lilly Endowment-funded project to support for churches to experiment with new ministries.

As a retiree, Carl took on a new role as loving critic of the church that he continued to serve. As writer and “editor at large” for The Presbyterian Outlook, an independently weekly, he opined on a variety of ecclesiastical topics, including some sacred cows. In 1988, for example, he cast a wary eye on newly minted “Brief Statement of Faith.” This was an official “confessional” document issued in the wake of the church’s recent reunion with the southern Presbyterian church, which had split from the national church in 1861 over the slavery issue. In his view, the church missed the mark in issuing an uncontroversial, big-tent document that “every group and viewpoint would find compatible” rather than “a document that challenged our rampant individualism and pointed us toward our place in the Body of Christ.”

In other editorials, Carl chided those who constantly fretted about conflict in the church. “This tumult and shouting is a part of our tradition and it hasn’t made church members head toward the exits – mainly because they like being Presbyterian. The church is part of the way they identify themselves.” He called for ending the special status of “paradenuminational groups,” which lobbied for narrow theological and political agendas, often with an “angry passion.” He questioned a rule-bound revision of the pastoral call system that brought to mind T.S. Eliot’s “dream of systems so perfect that no one will have to be good.” After noticing that the funds supporting his small Disciples of Christ pension regularly outperformed the PC(USA) pension fund, Carl called for regular outside evaluation of the...
Presbyterian Board of Pensions. "We are Calvinists, after all,” he wrote, "and know that every one of us needs the judgment of others.”

In a prescient 1996 op-ed, Carl called out the General Assembly, the PC(USA)’s national governing body, for its "Never-Never Land” vote to require permanent celibacy for ordained gays and lesbians, and celibacy outside of marriage for everyone else. He wrote: Church managers have a passionate belief in the Power of Pronouncements. Their bumper sticker reads: “The General Assembly said it; that ends it.” This mentality doesn’t learn from history. We have been making the same pronouncement for 20 years, yet there persists the child-like belief that if we say it one more time it will take. We’ll see. But don’t bet the farm on it. … The church is guided only partly by rules. It is also guided by compassion, trust, faith and forgiveness.

On June 10, 1950, Carl married Jane Avery Smith of Moorestown, NJ, a classmate at Yale Divinity School. Carl and Jane had three children: Jennifer, Suzanne, and William. The family enjoyed annual summer vacations on Echo Lake, Readfield, ME. Jane, an educator and writer, died on December 12, 1979, after battling cancer for many years.

On August 24, 1981, Carl married Mary Helen Lawson, a social worker and consultant, who was also an alumna of Yale Divinity School. In their retirement, Carl and Mary Helen moved to Maine, spending summers at Echo Lake and winters at their home in Augusta. Carl soon became active in local politics and community organizations, serving as president of the Echo Lake Association, and running (unsuccessfully) for the Augusta City Council.

In 2004, the couple moved to Cathedral Village in Philadelphia, where Carl cared for Mary Helen, who suffers from Alzheimer’s Disease and lives in Bishop White Lodge, CV’s fulltime care facility. Carl fed Mary Helen lunch and dinner nearly every day, and took her for wheelchair strolls in the CV building and grounds.

Until his final illness, Carl remained intellectually active and physically fit, and enthusiastically participated in community and family events. He swam every morning in the CV pool. He taught courses at “Cathedral College” with topics ranging from Tolstoy’s “War and Peace” and George Eliot’s “Middlemarch,” to the Protestant Reformation, to weight loss. One of Carl’s most popular courses, entitled “I Don’t Want to Talk About It,” covered often-avoided subjects like finances, senior citizen sexuality, neglected children, and death.

Several years ago, he gave up on driving but not on traveling. He regularly took SEPTA’s Number 9 bus to downtown Philadelphia to have lunch with his children Bill and Sue. He also travelled by train, bus, or plane to visit family and friends to visit the Guggenheim Museum and other Manhattan sites, attend family weddings, and participate in an annual meeting of clergy colleagues in Chicago.

In January 2014, at the age of 90, Carl started an online blog entitled “Gray Hair & Gray Matter.” The blog’s first edition included the following musings on the end of life:

Last August the Christian Century carried a whimsical comment from Richard Morgan, a Lutheran pastor, who moved into a retirement community with his spouse, “It struck him that they were entering something like the monastic life. They surrendered all ownership of property; they relinquished control over their own lives, giving control to the retirement corporation; and they now live by a fixed schedule. . . . As St Benedict admonished in his rule for monastic life, they regularly ponder the fact that they will die—for their neighbors die rather frequently.” Speaking of pondering on the end of life, here is some wisdom from William Sloan Coffin (Yale chaplain, peace activist, pastor of Riverside Church): "The one true freedom in life is to come to terms with death, and as early as possible, for death is an event that embraces all our lives. And the only way to have a good death is to lead a good life. Lead a good one, full of curiosity, generosity and compassion and there’s no need at the close of the day to rage against the dying of the light. We can go gentle into that good night”

Carl is survived by his children Jennifer Q. Smith of Indianapolis, IN; Suzanne A. Smith of Montclair, NJ; and William C. Smith of Narberth, PA; and his brother Irvin D. Smith of Portland, OR. He is also survived by his wife Mary Helen and her children Kristor J. Lawson of Berkeley, CA; Elizabeth Lawson of Occidental, CA; David B. Lawson, of Sebastapol, CA; Matthew P. Lawson of Ewing, NJ; and Rev. Ruth A. Kirk of Wilmington, DE. Carl and Mary Helen collectively have twenty grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held on Saturday, June 13, at 2 p.m., at Cathedral Village, 600 E. Cathedral Road, Philadelphia, PA 19128. Rev. Cynthia A. Jarvis of the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, PA., will officiate. There will be a reception immediately following the service.

The family has requested that, in lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Project HOME, a Philadelphia non-profit organization committed to breaking the cycle of poverty and homelessness through affordable housing, employment, health care and education. Tax-deductible donations to Project HOME may be made online to https://community.projecthome.org/donate (indicate "In Memory of Carl Smith" under "Tribute Information") or mailed to Project HOME, 1515 Fairmount Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19130.