“A True Pacifist”

STH’s Paul K. Deats tackled social issues with compassion

By Katie Koch

on the eve of the American military’s foray into Iraq in 2003, Paul K. Deats was among the protestors who took to the streets of Boston.

At eighty-three, the School of Theology professor emeritus may have seemed out of place marching up Beacon Hill. But to those who knew his history as an advocate of social justice, civil rights, and nonviolence, the act was perfectly in character.

“He was a true pacifist,” says Norman Faramelli, an STH lecturer of theology, philosophy, and ethics, who knew Deats for nearly forty years.

Deats (GRS’54), who was BU’s Walter Muelder Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics, died on July 12, 2009. He was ninety.

Deats taught sociology and ethics at BU from 1953 until 1986, and was appointed the first Muelder Professor of Social Ethics in 1979. In his three decades at BU, he championed a philosophy of compassion and social justice that, he believed, should take Christians beyond their churches. He required students in his courses to leave academia to visit prisons, areas of poverty, and funeral homes.

“He had a very strong sense of social and racial justice,” says Faramelli.

A native of Graham, Texas, Deats earned a bachelor’s degree from Southern Methodist University in 1937 and later studied at Union Theological Seminary.

His work led him and his wife, Ruth Zumbrunnen, to the University of Texas at Arlington to direct the Wesley Foundation, a Methodist ministry for students. Deats’s emphasis on racial equality and integration didn’t sit well with his superiors — he was fired, and the couple moved to Boston.

At BU, Deats studied under Walter Muelder (STH’30, GRS’33, Hon.’73), then the dean of STH, who would become his close collaborator. He earned a doctorate in the sociology of religion and social ethics in 1954.

Surrounded by the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS’55, Hon.’59) and Howard Thurman, (Hon.’67), dean of Marsh Chapel from 1953 to 1965, he became more active in the civil rights movement. He traveled to St. Augustine, Florida, at King’s behest, and cofounded the Newton Fair Housing Committee after Massachusetts Turnpike construction demolished the homes of many black residents in West Newton.

As chairman of the national Fellowship of Reconciliation, he helped advocate for an end to war.

Deats could be blunt and demanding, says Faramelli, a sign of the high expectations he had for his students and colleagues.

“His former students speak fondly of him because he took their work very seriously, and took them very seriously,” says Faramelli. “He would not stand for sloppy reasoning.”

As an ethical traditionalist, Deats focused on institutions and their value structures as a necessary context for studying individuals’ moral behavior. He and Muelder favored an interdisciplinary approach to answering theological questions.

“He was very methodical in his approach” to ethics, says Faramelli. “If conclusions didn’t work, he wanted you to go back and rework them.” His four-volume study Methodism and Society (1960–1962), cowritten with Herbert Stotts, a fellow STH professor, laid out his systematic thinking.

As a co-editor of The Boston Personalist Tradition: In Philosophy, Social Ethics, and Theology (1986), Deats also contributed to the foundations of Boston Personalism, a school of religious philosophy popularized at BU that had been laid by Borden Parker Bowne and later by Muelder, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, and Harold DeWolf (STH’26, GRS’35), all BU professors.

“He said, ‘Whether we like it or not, we’re going to be engaged in conflict,’” Faramelli explains. “‘The role of the Christian is always to work toward reconciliation, to find alternatives to violence.’”

While the existing moral laws tried to define right and wrong, “Paul was talking about how we act in the process of being ethical,” Faramelli says. “It was a good reflection of who he was.”

After his retirement, Deats chaired a committee on physician-assisted suicide for the Massachusetts Council of Churches, advocating for a more realistic approach to the topic, and joined a group of retired Methodist ministers willing to perform same-sex marriages. He was active in the Boston Theological Institute’s ethics group.

“He journeyed took him from a small town to an international perspective, from segregation to civil rights,” says Pat Jehlen, Deats’s daughter and a Massachusetts state senator. “He was delighted at the election of Barack Obama, which signified how far the country had come as well.”