In Memoriam


Virginia Theological Seminary shares the sad news of the death of Murray Lee Newman, longtime VTS faculty member. He died on August 3, 2017, after a period of declining health since the spring. He was surrounded by loved ones and not in pain. Dr. Newman served as professor of Old Testament for over 40 years at VTS and as a priest in the Diocese of Virginia. He was a beloved faculty member of generations of VTS alumni.

Murray L. Newman, Jr. was born in Checotah, Oklahoma, on August 22, 1924, and grew up in Muskogee, Oklahoma. He earned a B.A. in English Literature from Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma, in 1946 and an M.A. in New Testament in 1947.

Ordained as a young man in the Disciples of Christ Church, he went on to pursue a Th.D. in Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He joined the Episcopal Church while at Union and was received into the priesthood at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine by the Rt. Rev. James Pike. He served for one year on the faculty of Union at the same time as the renowned theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

After a year each at Vassar College, Union Seminary, and Smith College, he taught at Virginia Theological Seminary from 1955 to 1996.

Murray was especially interested in the early Mosaic period of the Old Testament. He wrote “The People of the Covenant: A Study of Israel from Moses to the Monarchy” (1962, Abingdon), a book arguing for two covenant traditions in ancient Israel, one located in the south (J-P) and one in the north (E-D). He was most at home in the classroom and engaging seminary students. At VTS, Murray was an enthusiastic teacher of the Old Testament to generations of students. Many of his students remember learning one of the oldest parts of scripture, Miriam’s song of triumph at the Red Sea in Hebrew: Shiru le-Yahweh ki ga-oh-ga-ah, Sus we-rokhvo ramah vayyam. “Sing to Yahweh, for he has triumphed gloriously; Horse and its rider he has cast into the Sea!” Another innovative course he taught reflected his ongoing interest in politics and religious life. The elective, “The Bible and the New York Times,” was inspired by Karl Barth’s dictum that one should read the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other.

Other major commitments of Murray while at VTS were related to lay education, ecumenism, and peace and justice in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He regularly taught in the Lay School at VTS, now the Lifetime Theological Education program. He was deeply committed to the Washington, D.C. theological consortium, which arranged for students to take courses in an ecumenical consortium of area seminars. Alternating with other faculty, he led the annual seminary study tour of the Holy Land housed at St. George’s College in East Jerusalem. During that time, he learned about the foundational and ongoing injustices experienced by the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. He was deeply concerned and taught about the need for a just and peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

While in retirement in Collington, Murray became particularly concerned about climate change and served capably on the Collington Sustainability Committee to research ways in which Collington could conserve energy.

In his life activities and interactions with family, he displayed wisdom and a keen sense of humor, and above all a commitment to his vocation as teacher, scholar, and priest of the church. He is survived by his wife of 71 years, Janice Hood Newman, four children, Lee, Nancy, Martin, and Judith, and five grandchildren. A memorial or interment service will be planned in the future. In lieu of flowers, contributions in his memory may be made to American Near East Refugee Aid or St. George’s College in Jerusalem.

We are grateful to Judith Newman, Rev. Newman’s daughter, for her assistance with the above obituary.