



Telling Our Stories

250 Years of United Methodism
in the New York Area

1766-2016 www.nyac.com/250years



Image courtesy of the General Commission on Archives and History

Social Activist, Musician, and First Openly Gay Pastor in the NYAC

1937-1992

Paul Abels

Rev. Paul Abels lived a life of integrity, courage, and faith with a “million dollar smile.” He worked for social justice, pursued his love of the arts, music and historical preservation, and challenged the church to open its doors to the diverse concerns of the gay and lesbian community.

During his pastorate at Washington Square UMC (known as the “Peace Church”), he nurtured community organizations and oversaw an extensive building restoration campaign. He also began performing “covenant ceremonies” for gay and lesbian members of his congregation.

Controversy ensued when he publicly acknowledged his homosexuality in 1977. He was urged to take a leave but declined, and both NYAC and the Judicial Council upheld his appointment. In 1984 he retired, the same year that General Conference voted to bar actively gay men and women from ordination and serving as clergy.

Upon his passing NYC Mayor David Dinkins sent this message:

“It is often said that the rent we pay for space on earth is the service we provide to others. Paul certainly departed us paid in full. May our lives be as rich.”

For Discussion

- In his role as pastor, Abels was well-respected for his social activism and work in the arts. How important is it for pastors to be leaders both in the church and in the community?
- Society’s attitudes toward the LGBTQ community have changed significantly in the last few years. Within the UMC, debate continues regarding its policies on same-sex marriage, openly gay pastors, and other LGBTQ issues. How would you propose the UMC resolve these issues?

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