



## Rev. Dr. Paul R. Fries

October 24, 1935 - November 10, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Paul R. Fries passed away on Sunday, November 10th. He was 89 years old. He was a resident of Lebanon, PA, and formerly of Kintnersville, PA. He is survived by his loving wife of 35 years, the Rev. Janet Johnston Fries.

Dr. Fries was born on October 24, 1935, in Humboldt, IA. When he was two years old, his father found employment working under the Rural Electrification Act (REA) of 1936 and moved the family in a trailer, from place to place, wherever the projects took them. Within his first 10 years, Paul lived in more than 30 locations throughout the Midwest and attended school in each place. (This may account for his lust for traveling.)

The family finally settled in Rutland, IA, where Paul finished his elementary education. They moved once again to Muskegon, MI, where he graduated from high school. In 1957 he graduated from the University of Michigan with honors in English literature. Paul was an avid reader of literature for his entire life. He was particularly influenced by the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky and later taught occasional courses on these works from a theological perspective. After college he became interested in theology and ministry. He began his preparation for ministry at Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary followed by Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI, where in 1962, he received a Master of Divinity degree.

In the late summer of 1962, Paul, along with his first wife (the late Ruth Workman) and their young daughter, Anne, left Michigan and traveled by bus to Hoboken, NJ, where they boarded the Maasdam and set sail for the Netherlands there to study with a renowned theologian (A.A. Van Ruler) whose works Paul knew only by report since they were not published in English. The lectures and readings would be in Dutch and German, and Paul knew not a word in either. He began to read the works with a Dutch-English dictionary and a notebook always at his side. It took him 12 hours to translate less than a page. By mid-October he understood the language well enough to attend lectures and begin his reading program with the famous professor. Eventually, he spoke Dutch with ease, and in 1964 earned a Th.Drs., cum laude, at the University of Utrecht. During this period, Paul and Ruth welcomed the birth of their son, Paul Jonathan.

In 1965, Paul was called to serve as Minister of Homewood Reformed Church, Homewood, IL. In 1968, he began a long and illustrious academic career when called to serve as Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at New Brunswick Theological Seminary (NBTS), New Brunswick, NJ. In 1978, he returned to the parish for three years serving as Minister of Preaching and Worship at Hope Church, Holland, MI, as well as adjunct professor in the religion department at Hope College. While in this position, he earned a Ph.D. from the University of Utrecht, having written and defended his thesis, *Religion and the Hope for A Truly Human Existence: An Inquiry into the Theology of F.D.E. Schleiermacher and A.A. Van Ruler with Questions for America*.

In 1982, he returned to NBTS to serve as Director of Continuing Studies and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology followed by other positions including Academic Dean and Professor of Systematic Theology, Professor of Foundational and Constructive Theology, and Dean of the Seminary. Upon

retirement he was declared Emeritus General Synod Professor of Theology, by the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Paul was especially proud of his ecumenical work representing the RCA in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue leading to a historic agreement between the two bodies known as “A Formula of Agreement”. He delivered scores of lectures and papers in service of the church. He also led numerous lay and clergy continuing education programs. He organized and administered the International Summer School of Theology held every second year from 1974-2004 in the Netherlands, bringing together American and Dutch students and clergy with lecturers from Dutch universities to speak on theological issues. Finally, his heart never left the parish as he faithfully provided lay education, Bible studies, special programs and preaching for congregations well into his retirement years.

During his retirement, he continued to read widely and worked daily on his personal passion: writing poetry. He was still editing a volume at the time of his death. He enjoyed traveling with his second wife, Janet L. Johnston, whom he married in 1989. They visited the Netherlands, France, England, Scotland (the Isle of Skye), Ireland, Denmark, Turkey, and Canada. Once they met Anne and her family in the Netherlands and revisited Anne’s childhood home. A significant part of Paul’s and Janet’s travels involved international cuisine. Somewhere along the way Paul, with his unerring palate, developed culinary skills and became an avid home chef. Paul enjoyed gatherings with his children and grandchildren and, of course, prepared a duck feast for them at Christmas. He loved his home with Janet in Kintnersville where they had a pond and identified over 76 species of birds. Much of his poetry was inspired in this setting.

Dr. Fries was preceded in death by his parents, Roy and Pearl Fries. In addition to his wife, Janet, he is survived by his daughter, Anne E. Bessey

(Jeff), his son, Paul J. Fries (Billie Sola Fries), five grandchildren: Dr. Jason Bessey (Emily Moran), Matthew Bessey (Colleen Calvo), Sarah Bessey (Matt Amylon), Charley Fries and Luke Fries, as well as one great grandchild, Finnegan Bessey. He is also survived by two brothers, Dr. Donald Fries and Joel Fries.

A private funeral service will be held on Monday, November 18, in Bucks County, PA, the Rev. David Ruisard presiding. In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts may be directed to the following:

Western Theological Seminary  
Office of Advancement  
101 E 13th St  
Holland, MI 49423

New Brunswick Theological Seminary  
Office of Advancement  
35 Seminary Place  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1196

Pennsylvania Innocence Project  
Temple University  
1515 Market Street, Suite 300  
Philadelphia, PA 19102.