

Bestselling author and retired pastor Tim Keller dies at 72

May 22, 2023

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Tim Keller, an influential Presbyterian Church in America minister who founded a network of evangelical Christian churches in New York City, died. He was 72.

Known for his brainy and winsome approach to evangelism, Keller founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan in 1989 and grew the congregation into a hub for a network of churches across the city.

His 2008 book, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, reached *The New York Times* bestseller list. His books sold more than 3 million copies.

Keller had been under treatment for pancreatic cancer after announcing in June 2020 that he had the disease. On May 18, Keller's son Michael posted a message that his father had been released from the hospital and would receive hospice care at home.

"It is with a heavy heart that I write today to inform you that Redeemer Presbyterian Church founder and long-time senior pastor, Tim Keller, passed away this morning at age 72, trusting in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection," Bruce Terrell, a leader of the Redeemer Leadership Network, wrote in an email announcing Keller's death.

"We are forever grateful for his leadership, heart and dedication to sharing the love of Christ with others. While we will miss his presence here, we know he is rejoicing with his Savior in heaven," Terrell wrote.

‘The Bible came alive’

Born Sept. 23, 1950, in Allentown, Penn., Timothy James Keller grew up in a Lutheran church and, later, in a congregation of a small denomination known as the Evangelical Congregational Church.

His mother wanted him to be a minister. But like many college students, he lost interest in practicing Christianity while studying at Bucknell University, even though he was a religion major, according to a recent biography.

Keller later recounted having a conversion experience as the result of being involved in an InterVarsity student ministry, where he learned to study the Bible from a ministry leader named Barbara Boyd.

“During college, the Bible came alive in a way that is hard to describe,” he wrote in his book, *Jesus is the King*.

“The best way I can put it is that, before the change, I pored over the Bible, questioning and analyzing it. But after the change, it was as if the Bible, or maybe Someone through the Bible, began poring over me, questioning and analyzing me.”

While attending Gordon-Conwell Seminary north of Boston, he became friends with Kathy Kristy, whom he had first met when visiting her sister, a classmate of Keller’s. After a rocky start, the two began dating while attending a summer class at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, according to *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*, a recent biography by Collin Hansen. They later married.

After seminary, Keller became pastor of West Hopewell Presbyterian Church in Hopewell, Va., part of the newly formed Presbyterian Church in America, where he spent five years. There, his ministry was shaped by

lessons he'd learned at the Ligonier Study Center run by R.C. Sproul, an influential Calvinist author and preacher. In particular, he held regular question-and-answer discussions with the congregation.

He then spent five years teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary before moving to New York to plant Redeemer in Manhattan. That startup church began meeting in space rented from a Seventh-day Adventist congregation.

Redeemer Church flourished in Manhattan

The church grew quickly to a group of 250, according to a history posted on its website. Unlike many urban churches, which drew crowds with rock bands, Redeemer became known for its traditional worship style and for Keller's sermons, appealing to the mind as well as the heart. Redeemer eventually grew into a congregation of more than 5,000 and became known for planting other congregations in New York and beyond.

Keller told *Christianity Today* in a 2022 podcast he wanted people to see the Christian gospel as "intellectually credible" and to recognize that "it offers something that they've been looking for all their lives." He said he also wanted newcomers to be "gratified participants."

"They felt that they were not trespassers, they felt welcomed, they felt that they were expected, and they were not under pressure to immediately bow the knee," he said.

Author Jonathan Rauch became friends with Keller in recent years. Despite their differences—Keller was a conservative evangelical pastor, Rauch is Jewish, atheistic and openly gay—Rauch said he never doubted his friend's love.

“Though he was a man of profound learning, he always expressed it with curiosity and humility,” he said. “Though he was devoted to the church and a builder of institutions, he never forgot that individuals come first. Tim’s pastorate was universal, a gift to believers and unbelievers alike. When I hear the term ‘Christlike,’ I’ll think of him.”

“I was blessed to get to know Tim a bit over the past year,” said Karen Swallow Prior, a professor of literature and Religion News Service columnist. “He went out of his way a couple of times to reach out to me and offer personal encouragement and support at specific moments when I needed it. That showed me exactly the kind of person he is, and that’s the kind of person I want to be. Tim’s legacy is deep, wide, and immeasurable.”

Keller also was a leading figure in the Neo-Reformed movement as one of the co-founders of The Gospel Coalition. “We are a fellowship of evangelical churches in the Reformed tradition deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures,” the group’s preamble says.

Conservative but not confrontational

Known for his conservative but non-confrontational approach to ministry, Keller came under fire in recent years from critics who said his “winsome” approach to engaging with culture no longer works in such a polarized time.

Keller told Religion News Service in a 2022 interview he found such criticism puzzling. As an evangelical pastor in New York, he said, his views were often in conflict with the broader culture. But that was not going to stop him from acting like a Christian.

“This was never the neutral territory,” said Keller, who stepped down as pastor of Redeemer in 2017. “We always had opposition.”

John Starke, pastor of Apostles Church Uptown in New York City, said, “While Tim is often known for listening to his critics, I’m glad he listened to Jesus here more.”

Starke said Keller taught him the connection between knowledge and vibrant spirituality, but also how to pray.

“Tim taught many of us pastors who ministered in urban contexts how to have a cultural and theological grid when we thought and talked about the world around us,” Starke said. “But he also taught us how to pray for revival and experience personal spiritual renewal. It was both, and both were important to him.”

Unlike other evangelical pastors, Keller was skeptical of Donald Trump. He was part of a 2017 closed-door gathering of evangelical leaders who met at Wheaton College to try to figure out the movement’s future in the age of Trump.

“As the country has become more polarized, so has the church, and that’s because the church is not different enough from modernity,” Keller reportedly said at the meeting. “There’s now a red evangelicalism and a blue evangelicalism.”

Despite his illness, Keller kept writing. In his 2022 book, *Forgive*, he described the power of forgiveness, something he said many of his fellow Christians have lost faith in.

“A secret to overcoming evil is to see it as something distinct from the evildoer,” he wrote, “Our true enemy is the evil in the person and we want it defeated in him or her.”

In their update about Keller’s health on Thursday, Keller’s family said that he was grateful for all those who have prayed for him.

“I’m thankful for my family, that loves me. I’m thankful for the time God has given me, but I’m ready to see Jesus,” he prayed, according to the family update. “I can’t wait to see Jesus. Send me home.”

In addition to his wife and son Michael, Keller is survived by sons David and Jonathan, a sister, Sharon Johnson of Sorrento, Fla., his daughters-in-law Jennifer, Sara and Ann-Marie, and seven grandchildren.