

John MacArthur, controversial pastor and radio host, has died

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(RNS)—John MacArthur, megachurch pastor, culture warrior, author and longtime voice of the “Grace to You” radio program, has died.

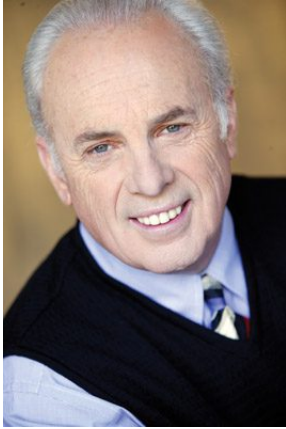
He was 86.

“John MacArthur went to heaven at 6:17 p.m. California time,” Phil Johnson, executive director of “Grace to You,” told RNS in a text message.

During a July 13 service at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, Calif., Tom Patton, one of the congregation’s longtime pastors, announced MacArthur had been hospitalized and was near death.

“You need to know that this week, Pastor John contracted pneumonia,” Patton told the congregation, according to a livestream of the service [posted](#) on social media. “He was admitted into the hospital, and may be in the presence of the Lord soon.”

Patton then asked the congregation to pray for MacArthur, the church’s longtime senior pastor, his wife, Patricia, and the couple’s four adult children and their families.



John MacArthur.
(Photo courtesy
Grace to You via
RNS)

On Sunday, Johnson told RNS that doctors had done all they could for MacArthur and he was on “the precipice of heaven.”

“He has suffered much in recent weeks,” Johnson said in a text message on Sunday evening. “His mind is still sharp but his body is spent.”

MacArthur was known both his preaching and his penchant for controversy—especially his feuds in recent years with public health officials in Los Angeles during COVID-19 shutdowns, his critique of women in ministry and his criticism of pastors who discussed racism in church. He had been ill for much of the past year after having surgery in 2024 to replace a heart valve.

Background

The son and grandson of preachers, MacArthur was born June 19, 1939, in Los Angeles, where his father, John “Jack” MacArthur, was pastor at Manchester Baptist Church.

His father became a traveling evangelist, and the family lived in Chicago

and Philadelphia before returning to Los Angeles, where his father led the “Voice of Calvary” radio ministry.

After graduating from high school, where he played football and baseball, MacArthur spent two years at Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist school in South Carolina, where he got his first taste of preaching during a student mission project.

During a cross-country trip as a student, MacArthur was thrown from a car while traveling in Alabama, which left him with painful [abrasions and burns on his back](#). After that experience, he felt a call to the ministry.

He then transferred to Los Angeles Pacific College, where he played three sports, then attended Talbot Theological Seminary from 1961 to 1964. While in seminary, MacArthur claimed the Cleveland Browns professional football team called him after star wide receiver Paul Warfield was injured and asked him to sign as a backup.

“No,” he told them, according to a [“Grace to You” account](#) of his early years in ministry. “I’m going to seminary,” he said.

However, critics of MacArthur have pointed out he barely played for his college football team and noted Warfield was [injured in a 1965](#) exhibition game, according to the *New York Times*, after MacArthur had graduated from seminary.

MacArthur also claimed for years he had driven to Lorraine Hotel in Memphis with a group of Black pastors on the night Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and stood with them on the balcony where the Civil Rights icon was killed within an hour of the shooting—a claim some of those pastors [have said was untrue](#).

In 1969, he was called as pastor Grace of Community Church succeeding Richard Elvee, who had died the previous year.

MacArthur's first sermon, "How to Play Church," claimed most churches in the country were dead spiritually. The idea few Christians—especially those outside his corner of evangelicalism—were real Christians would become an ongoing theme in MacArthur's ministry.

"Probably the majority of them don't even know what it is to be a Christian, and they're dead spiritually," he said in 1969.

MacArthur's arrival led to a long period of renewal and growth at Grace Community, which became known for active church members.

He would become known as one of the nation's foremost expository preachers, committed to preaching verse by verse through the Bible. MacArthur's sermons were broadcast by "Grace to You," the radio ministry he founded the same year he arrived at Grace Community Church.



Pastor John MacArthur speaks at Grace Community Church in May 2023 in Sun Valley, Calif. (Video screen grab via Youtube/Grace Community Church and RNS)

MacArthur also churned out more than 100 books as an author or editor but perhaps was best known for the study Bible he edited and his Bible commentary published in 2005.

In 1985, he became president of the Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary, changing its name to The Master's College, later The Master's University, now a nondenominational school. He also hosted the annual Shepherds Conference, a gathering for Calvinist-leaning evangelical pastors.

Unlike many evangelical megachurch pastors, who adopted casual dress, rock-band driven worship and TED talk-style sermons, MacArthur was known for preaching long sermons in a suit and preferring hymns and more traditional music.

Controversy and reach

Matthew Avery Sutton, a Washington State University professor who studies evangelicals, said MacArthur represented the confrontational side of the Religious Right, one that sees anyone who disagrees as a heretic and enemy of Christianity.

MacArthur also believed having male leaders was an essential part of Christian faith and resisted any attempts to have women in leadership roles.

Sutton said MacArthur showed the widespread influence of evangelicalism.

"This isn't a guy in the Bible belt," he said. "This is a pastor in the wealthy Los Angeles suburbs. He shows that the influence of the religious right is urban and Western as much as it is Southern and rural."

Ed Stetzer, dean of Talbot School of Theology, said MacArthur was "a towering figure" and that his passing marked the end of an era.

"His theological impact is global, far beyond what most American observers might think," Stetzer said.

“In addition, he’s been a voice for the revived religious right on almost every hot-button issue. MacArthur’s influence is widespread, with few evangelical pastors untouched by his teaching or influence—even those who did not fully align with all of his views.”

MacArthur was also an institution builder, running not just a megachurch but also a university with its own seminary and a radio ministry.

“Nobody else was ever doing anything that was good enough for him,” Sutton said. “He had to create his own institutions because no one else lived up to his standards.”

MacArthur’s insistence that church members live up to his expectations of true Christianity led at times to controversy, especially in a case where the church disciplined a church member who divorced her husband after discovering he had abused their children.

For years, church leaders sided with the husband, even though he was convicted for abuse. The church has been criticized repeatedly for its approach to church discipline—and earlier this year was sued by a former member who said church leaders shared confidential information about her during a public shaming.

MacArthur clashed with evangelical leaders he saw as being too politically or theologically liberal. He was particularly critical of Pentecostal and charismatic leaders, whom he [accused for decades](#) of leading millions of Christians around the world astray.

He claimed [Martin Luther King Jr. was not a Christian](#). Once asked to give his thoughts on Beth Moore, the best-selling Bible teacher, MacArthur’s response was [two words: “Go home.”](#)

He also accused pastors who spoke about racism or social justice of being woke and was particularly angered at a 2018 conference held in Memphis

to commemorate the death of MLK. That event drew evangelical leaders like John Piper, Matt Chandler and John Perkins—an author, activist and preacher known for addressing issues of poverty and race.

In response, MacArthur organized a “Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel,” which argued that talking about social justice and race were distractions from preaching the gospel and were dividing the church.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the summer of 2020, MacArthur and other leaders at Grace Community Church [decided to hold in-person worship](#) with no social distancing or masks—despite public health orders to the contrary. Church leaders said [government officials](#) had no authority over worship services, a claim that [landed the church in court](#).

The U.S. Supreme Court eventually ruled California officials [could not bar churches](#) from meeting in person. That led to Los Angeles County [paying \\$400,000](#) to settle its legal dispute with the church.

After the settlement, MacArthur claimed natural immune responses had kept church members safe during the pandemic.

“God has a way of taking care of us as we love each other and share our germs,” MacArthur told congregants. The church’s legal battle over COVID shutdowns were the subject of a 2023 documentary entitled *Essential Church*.

On Sunday, the focus was not on politics or any of MacArthur’s controversies. Instead, the church prayed for its pastor and his family as he faced his final hours.

“We ask for the greatest expression of your kindness to be bestowed upon our pastor now as he grows ever nearer to the completion of the mission that you had granted him before the beginning of time,” Patton prayed.

“Our hearts are heavy, yet rejoicing, as we share the news that our beloved pastor and teacher John MacArthur has entered into the presence of the Savior,” read a [“Grace to You” post](#) announcing MacArthur’s death. “This evening, his faith became sight. He faithfully endured until his race was run.”