

NEWS

Rev. Steve Montgomery, longtime Idlewild pastor and Christian warrior for justice, has died

John Beifuss Memphis Commercial Appeal

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The Rev. Steve Montgomery, the beloved longtime pastor of Idlewild Presbyterian Church whose insistence on respecting and protecting the basic human rights of people of all creeds, colors and national and sexual identities made him a progressive conscience of Memphis, died Friday at Regional One after being critically injured Tuesday evening during a bicycle ride.

In a decision made by the family and in accordance with the terms of Rev. Montgomery's "living will," the 68-year-old minister was removed from the life support machinery that doctors said would have kept him in a coma, at best, with no expectation of recovery.

The decision was made at 10 a.m., said Rev. Montgomery's daughter, Sumita Montgomery, 27, who was at her father's bedside, along with her mother, Patti Montgomery; her brother, Aaron, 29, known as "A.J."; and the Rev. Montgomery's longtime friend, Dr. Scott Morris, founder of the Church Health Center.

Sumita Montgomery said her father's sister and two brothers were on "speaker phone," which she held to her father's ear so "they all got to say goodbye. They all just expressed how much they loved him."

Her father loved music, she said, "so we ended by singing the doxology," the hymn that traditionally concludes Presbyterian church services: *"Praise God from whom all blessings flow/ Praise him all creatures here below ..."*

A nationally renowned and internationally respected minister and author with a Master of Divinity degree from Yale University and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia, Stephen R. Montgomery — universally known as "Steve," despite the "Dr." and "Rev." honorifics formally attached to his name — was pastor at prominent Idlewild Presbyterian Church from 2000 until his retirement 15 months ago.

He preached his final sermon as senior pastor in the historic 1926 Gothic Revival building at 1750 Union on May 5, 2019.

Rev. Montgomery's sermons, newspaper columns ("Why the church welcomes the immigrant" was the headline of a 2017 contribution to The Commercial Appeal) and outreach to the LGBT, Muslim and homeless communities occasionally rankled some of the more conservative members of a congregation that dated its establishment to 1891.

But he also earned almost universal respect for his insistence that "social justice" and "urban ministry" efforts were not just compatible but integral to the Christian mission, as manifestations of what Rev. Montgomery called "God's will for justice."

His attitude toward the church and his interpretation of the message of Jesus Christ were reflected in the "vision statement" that Idlewild crafted during Rev. Montgomery's tenure, which declares that Idlewild is a community where "Justice Speaks Loudly" and "All Who Enter Find a Home."

According to police, Rev. Montgomery — an avid bicyclist since his retirement — was riding his bike at about 7:15 p.m. Tuesday when he was struck by a vehicle on North Perkins at Sequoia, not far from his home (where a sign posted in the front yard applies a quote from the Old Testament book of Amos to the Black Lives Matter movement: "Ahmaud, George, Breonna — Let justice roll down like waters"). He apparently turned left from a right-hand bike lane when he was struck. The driver, who stopped to help, was not charged.

As reported by The Daily Memphian (where Rev. Montgomery had become a contributing columnist), another driver, Duke Henry, a retired Navy medic, stopped to administer CPR and to keep Rev. Montgomery awake until an ambulance arrived.

In the critical care unit at Regional One hospital it was determined that Rev. Montgomery had a shattered pelvis, multiple spinal injuries and brain bruising and bleeding. Doctors determined he would be unable to breathe on his own or to regain consciousness.

Ordained in 1980, Rev. Montgomery grew up in Richmond, Virginia, where he received an early awakening of conscience when, as a teenager, he was shocked when some of his classmates cheered at the news of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in Memphis.

Fifty years later, he remained "haunted" by the incident, he said, and haunted in a different way by the words in King's famous "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," in which King wrote: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

"We tend to self-select those quotes made by Dr. King that keep us safely in our ideological cocoon," Rev. Montgomery wrote in The Commercial Appeal, "so that even a president who has the support of ... white supremacist groups can say that we have achieved his dream of a 'color-blind society,' all the while being a part of a system that has rolled back voting rights and other gains that Dr. King worked and died for."

U.S. Rep. Steve Cohen, D-Memphis, cited another civil rights legend in remembering Rev. Montgomery.

"There was a lot of John Lewis in Steve Montgomery," said Cohen, referring to the Georgia civil rights leader, known as the "Conscience of Congress," who died July 17 at 80.

Cohen said he had been "dealing with the death of my friend, Congressman John Lewis," when he was "shocked" by the news of Rev. Montgomery's death. Like Lewis, Cohen said, Rev. Montgomery was "courageous, he was caring, he was forgiving, he was humble, and he was smart."

"Steve was passionate about people who are excluded and pushed to the margins of society and whose voices aren't heard," said the Rev. Margaret Burnett, associate pastor for outreach at Idlewild from 2003 to 2019.

He included children among these "voiceless" people, she said, which was one reason he was outraged by the federal government's "family separation policy" for immigrants who enter the country illegally. "For the Bible I read and study daily is filled with passion for welcoming the alien, the sojourner, the fearful, and most especially the children," he wrote in The Commercial Appeal.

A perhaps equally remarkable aspect of his personality was that "I never heard the man judge or speak ill of anybody," Burnett said. "There aren't many people you can say that about."

Rev. Montgomery's questing mind was complemented by his geographical wanderlust: He and his family in recent years traveled to Peru and Nepal. He also was well-traveled as a church leader, serving in churches from residential Atlanta to impoverished Appalachia in eastern Kentucky before settling in Memphis, where he soon became a genuine "Memphian" whose enthusiasm for the city extended to its sports teams, its food and other aspects only tangentially connected to his ministry.

"I saw myself as anything but a 'big steeple' preacher, but rather a servant leader devoting my ministry to those on the margins of society," Rev. Montgomery wrote in the foreword to his 2015 anthology, "Idlewild Sermons." "But God had other plans."

As impressive in height (he stood 6-foot-3) as in reputation, Rev. Montgomery's progressivism was deeply rooted in his Christian faith and his interpretation of the Bible. "The thing Steve said over and over was, 'If I err, I want to err on the side of grace,'" Burnett said. "He believed that's who Christ was, Christ was always on the side of grace."

Said Micah Greenstein, senior rabbi at Temple Israel: "The entire community of faith is better because of him. Whether you're a clergy or a teacher, whether you're a doctor or a blue-collar worker, in every profession there are a handful of kindred spirits that cross racial, religious or any other lines. Steve was one of those kindred spirits and true friends who bridged all differences without every relinquishing what it means to be a model Christian."

He said he and Rev. Montgomery both arrived in Memphis in 2000, and, in a phone call, they agreed to have their first face-to-face meeting at Fino's deli in Midtown. "I said, 'How will I know it's you?' and he said, quote, 'I look like a tall male rabbi with a beard.'"

In addition to his children and wife of 43 years, Patti, a retired therapist/nurse, Rev. Montgomery leaves a sister, Deedee Murphy of Atlanta, and two brothers, David Montgomery of Toledo and Jim Montgomery of Indiana.

Canale Funeral Directors has charge. Sumita Montgomery said her father will be cremated, and a plaque in his memory will be placed at a columbarium in the Idlewild courtyard.

Said Cohen of Rev. Montgomery: "His life was a blessing, and his death is a great loss."

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