



Obituary for Virginia Anne Bush Derr, August 3, 1932 – November 25, 2024

Born in Washington, DC, Virginia was the only child of Merle Seely and Richard Tabor Bush, of Berwick, Pennsylvania. When she was very young, they settled in Charleston, West Virginia where her engineer father had found work in the chemical industry. From walks in the hills with her father, (integrated) Girl Scouting with her mother, and participating in her family's church, she carried the loves of nature, singing, inclusive community, and the church throughout her life.

Virginia graduated from the (segregated) Charleston High School, and then earned her Bachelor's degree in Education and Art History from Duke University in 1954. After working for

the YWCA in Corpus Christi, Texas, she enrolled in the Master of Religious Education program at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. She and a fellow student, Thomas Derr, became involved with the civil rights movement, and social justice remained a life-long passion of hers. They married and moved to Palo Alto, California, where their first two children, Peter and Laura, were born. In 1959, she completed a Master's degree in history from Stanford University.

They moved back to New York City, and then to Geneva, Switzerland, where Thomas did research for his PhD at Columbia University. Their third child, Mary, called Molly, was born in Geneva. Thomas was hired by Smith College as a professor of religion, so he and Virginia raised their family in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Virginia had a great spirit of adventure, enthusiasm, and curiosity. A life-long learner, she embraced feminism, gay rights, racial justice, multi-cultural awareness, and mental health advances. While childrearing, she also developed a continuing education program to expand employment opportunities for low-income women and teens at the Holyoke YWCA; taught European history through the lens of art history at Holyoke Community College; volunteered at Northampton State Hospital, helping mental health professionals bring more humane care to patients; and co-led a troop of Girl Scouts.

Devoted to the teachings of Jesus, Virginia focused primarily on his message that all people are included in the community of love, especially those whom society has devalued. Committed to including children in church life, she directed the Christian education program at the First and Edwards Churches in Northampton, planned special services led by children, and encouraged them to participate in the many musical opportunities provided. She ensured her children had instrument lessons, and she herself learned to play the cello in her 30's.

When Virginia and Thomas separated in the late 1970's, she returned to Union Theological Seminary to complete her Master of Divinity degree, and she was ordained in 1980 in the United Church of Christ. She also acquired her Clinical Pastoral Education certification.

Embarking on a new career in the church, Virginia started out in associate pastor positions in White Plains, New Rochelle, and Rochester, New York. She was called in 1987 to be the pastor of Pilgrim United Church of Christ in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where she served for seven years. She was committed to her role as shepherd, making herself available to all her parishioners. Free summer vacation Bible school attracted families living downtown near the church to attend services, growing church membership. She oversaw the expansion of their free meal program, a community service that continues today. She especially loved to preach, crafting stories to illustrate her message inspired by a Gospel teaching. Every service included two sermons, one tailored for children, the other for adults. Leading Pilgrim Church was the highlight of her career as a pastor.

Virginia moved to Melbourne, Florida in 1994, and worked in a pastoral counseling center. In 1999, she returned to her hometown of Charleston, West Virginia, where, at her 50th high school class reunion, she met a childhood friend, Jack Kieffer. Two years later, they were married in their home church, Ruffner Memorial Presbyterian. While in Charleston, she provided spiritual direction at the West Virginia Institute for Spirituality, and served as pastor for the Presbyterian church in the tiny town of Comfort. Jack, proud preacher's husband, always attended her services.

Virginia and Jack retired to Brunswick, Maine to be closer to her family. At their First Parish Church, she led their grief support group, certain that consciousness continues on after the body dies. As in every previous church, she campaigned for the congregation to commit to the standard of being Open and Affirming, a status which promotes the message that LGBTQIA+ people, and people from all walks of life, are welcome and included.

While in Brunswick, Virginia also provided pulpit supply for several churches in the Maine Conference of the UCC, as well as volunteered as a hospital chaplain at the Maine Medical Center. She also participated in the larger church organization as a delegate at the regional and state levels. Her devotion to the church as a community of support was life-long, an anchor through all of her adventures. By the end of her life, she did figure out that what she had been taught is actually true: God is love, and she is loved.

Virginia was a consistent, supportive presence in her children's lives, proud of all their steps of growth and achievement. She has been a great role model for having the courage to be true to your own self and pursue what is meaningful in life. She also loved being a grandmother. She organized as many family adventures as she could fit in, and included her grandchildren Isadora, Sammy, Paul and Monica, and then Amaia and Luken when they arrived, in any way she could. She was so proud of their progress as they explored life. At 88, she was excited to become a great-grandmother to Amelia.

Virginia's health declined drastically after heart surgery at age 85. She and Jack lived with Molly and her family in Rockport, Massachusetts for the last three years of her life, where she joined the First Congregational Church. As she required more and more care from a devoted team of care-givers and family, she often verbalized that she was ready to go home to God. She died of heart failure at age 92. She is survived by her three children and her daughters-in-law Patricia and Lourdes, her six grandchildren and her grandson-in-law Pio, and her great-granddaughter.

A full life, well lived, we are so grateful for her gifts of enthusiasm, curiosity, courage, connection, inclusivity, and human rights, and we will carry on her legacy with joy!

A Celebration of Life Service will be held at the First Congregational Church of Rockport, Massachusetts, on Saturday, January 18, 2025 at 1:00. To participate online:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/yBLmvxY9m9M>

Donations in Rev. Virginia's honor may be sent to these two UCC funds:

Neighbors in Need supports social justice ministries in the United States.

<https://www.ucc.org/neighbors-in-need-special-mission-offering/>

The Northeast Association of the UCC maintains a scholarship fund for seminary students preparing for ministry with concern for social justice. Checks can be made out to: Northeast Association UCC, 21 Church St, Winchester MA 01890.