

## **Moss, Robert Verelle, Jr.** <sup>[1]</sup>

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by Katherine F. Martin, 1991

**3 Mar. 1922–18 Oct. 1976**

Robert Verelle Moss, Jr., educator, social activist, and president of the United Church of Christ, was born in Wilson, one of four children of Robert Verelle and Constance Bost Moss. Throughout a career marked by fruitful association with a variety of national and international organizations and committees, Moss remained deeply committed to the unity of the Christian church and to the struggle for racial equality and human rights. A leading modern Protestant ecumenist, he was a regular champion of liberal views, believing that the church had an obligation "to pioneer—to move ahead of society."

Moss received a B.A. degree from Franklin and Marshall College <sup>[2]</sup>, Lancaster, Pa., in 1943 and a B.D. degree from nearby Lancaster Theological Seminary two years later. In 1954 he was awarded a Ph.D. by the University of Chicago Divinity School <sup>[3]</sup>. A member of Phi Beta Kappa and of Phi Gamma Mu, he later received numerous honorary degrees—among them the D.D. from Franklin and Marshall (1960), Findlay (1967), and Lakeland (1969) colleges and the L.H.D. from Catawba (1971) and Drury (1972) colleges.

In 1946 Moss was ordained to the ministry in the United Church of Christ <sup>[4]</sup> in Hickory Hill, N.C. In the same year, on 20 June, he married Junia Evelyn Keppel; they became the parents of three sons: John K., Robert V., III, and Timothy I. That autumn Moss became an instructor in religion at Franklin and Marshall College, and in 1949 he was named an assistant professor. In 1951 he moved to the Lancaster Theological Seminary of the Evangelical and Reformed church as a professor of New Testament science. When Moss became president of the latter institution in 1957, at age thirty-five, he was one of the nation's youngest chief administrators of a divinity school. While affiliated with the seminary he wrote three texts designed for the use of Protestant lay workers enrolled in interdenominational leadership education schools, part of a series planned by the National Council of the Churches of Christ, which represented thirty-nine Protestant denominations. His works were titled *The Life of Paul* (1955), *We Believe* (1957), and *As Paul Sees Christ* (1958).

During his twelve years as seminary president, Moss was involved—both in this country and abroad—in the formation of interdenominational religious policy and the struggle for social justice. In 1961 he was a delegate to the World Council of Churches meeting in New Delhi, India, and the following year he served as a member of the International Congregational Council and as one of thirty-two Protestant observers at the Second Vatican Council. A vice-president of the National Council of Churches, he also chaired the council's Commission on Faith and Order. He was a member of the American Association of Theology Schools (president, 1966–68) and cochairman of the Roman Catholic–Presbyterian and Reformed Dialogue Group.

In 1969 Moss became president of the United Church of Christ on the first ballot, his election bringing solidarity to the 1.8 million-member denomination. The United Church was the product of the union of the Evangelical and Reformed church and the General Council of the Congregational Christian churches, begun in 1957 and completed in July 1961 at Philadelphia with the adoption of a constitution. This merger represented the first joining of American denominations with different backgrounds and forms of government.

On the occasion of his election to the first of two consecutive four-year terms as president of the United Church, Moss gave voice to his commitment to racial and economic justice, a cause that often generated heated opposition. He expressed his awareness of the separation of much of white America and organized religion alike from the poor, black, and powerless people of the world and urged recognition of and unity with the "dispossessed." He encouraged his denomination to "pursue relentlessly and with singleness of purpose absolute equality for the black man and his right to determine his own destiny."

Equally committed to amnesty for conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War <sup>[5]</sup>, with the full support of his son John, who was disabled while serving as a marine in Vietnam, and to the care of veterans who became victims of drug abuse, Moss also regularly urged Presidents Nixon <sup>[6]</sup> and Ford <sup>[7]</sup> to pardon war resisters and noncriminal deserters. In 1969 he was a member of a National Council of Churches delegation to Canada charged with developing channels of assistance for those who had fled there to escape the draft. From 1969 to 1973 he headed the National Council's Special Ministries to the Vietnam Generation. And at a Los Angeles, Calif., meeting of the World Council of Churches in 1973, he urged "total amnesty for all those in legal jeopardy" in order to "heal the wounds" of Vietnam.

His general devotion to social justice and the alleviation of oppression in all its forms led Moss in 1970 to advocate the calling of women to "highly visible" positions of responsibility in all religious bodies; as a result of his pressure, the following year the United Church of Christ created its Task Force on Women. In 1973 Moss headed the first official delegation from an American church to the churches of East Germany, becoming the first American to preach in the German Democratic Republic. In the year of his death he led a group of twenty-five leaders of the United Church on a tour

of the Far East to study oppression in Indonesia, martial law in the Philippines, and the division of the Christian church in Japan. He also made a side trip to protest the South Korean government's arrest of twenty-seven Christians of that nation. Thus until the end, when he succumbed to cancer in Montclair, N.J., at age fifty-four, Moss maintained an active personal and institutional concern for dispossessed people and a dedication to the realization of social justice in the world.

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