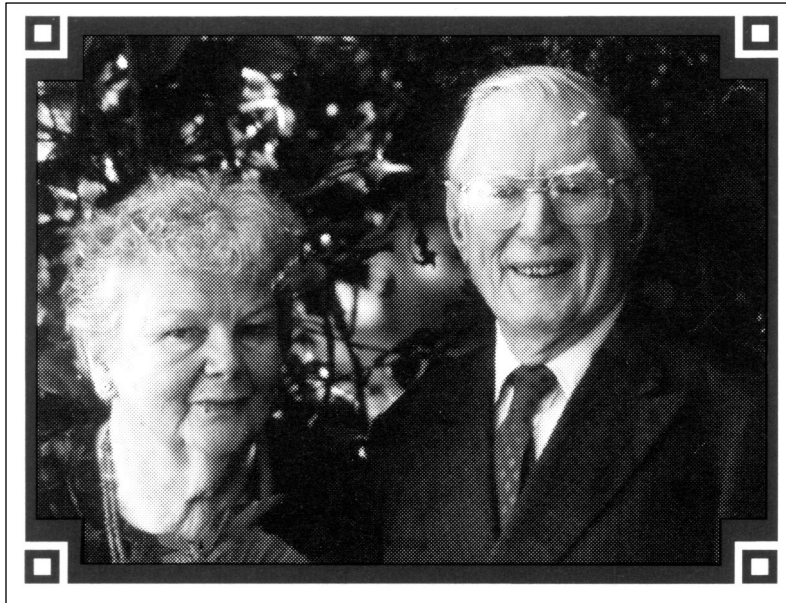


This Week in Eden History
December 10 | Harold H. Wilke



Harold Wilke and his wife, Margaret, in 1993.

Harold H. Wilke, prominent pastor and advocate for individuals with disabilities, was born **Dec. 10, 1914**, in Washington, Missouri (died Feb. 25, 2003, in Pomona, California). Wilke was born without arms and compensated by doing many tasks with his feet. Although facing physical challenges and prejudice, he was lived a full personal life and dedicated his professional activities to helping others.

Wilke grew up in Washington, Missouri in what is now St. Peter's United Church of Christ. Barred by the local elementary school as a distraction, he walked to a nearby country school, where he excelled. He was consequently invited to return to the city school system, graduating from Washington High in 1933. He received an A.B. from the University of Missouri (1937). After attending two quarters at Eden in 1936, he earned a B.D. degree from Union Theological Seminary (1939), an S.T.M. from Andover Newton Theological School (1943), and a PhD at the University

of Chicago (1952). Despite objections from the Evangelical and Reformed Church hierarchy, he was ordained in 1939.

His first call was as pastor of the Evangelical Synod's student chapel at the University of Missouri, 1939–1941. He served as chaplain at Winter Veterans Hospital in Topeka, Kan. during World War II. From 1949 to 1955, he was pastor of St. Paul's Evangelical & Reformed Church, Crystal Lake, Ill., and later became executive director of the UCC's Council for Church and Ministry (later known as the Office for Church Life and Leadership), 1955–1975. As an advocate for the rights of disabled people, Wilke promoted accessible church buildings and founded the Healing Community Project in 1975, which he directed until his retirement in 1989.

With Wilke's encouragement, Eden modified its campus in 1982 to make it accessible to those with disabilities, one of the first seminaries in the U.S. to do so. Using funds provided by Dr. Harold Peters Schultz, himself disabled by cerebral palsy, Eden added an elevator and an accessible restroom to the Press Administration Building and ramps and automatic doors throughout the campus. These improvements were celebrated at the 1982 Spring Convocation. Eden presented Wilke with an honorary Doctor of Divinity in 1993.

Wilke was instrumental in the founding of the National Organization on Disability (1982), which promoted legislation prohibiting workplace discrimination against disabled people and culminated in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. Wilke was also active in the Civil Rights movement and participated in several marches. He authored several books, including *Angels on My Shoulders and Muses at My Side* (1995). Wilke's papers are held by Eden Theological Seminary Archives. The collection includes personal and professional correspondence, 1963–1989.

Inclusion and anti-ableism continue to be Eden concerns, themes that were the focus of the [2021 Schmiechen Public Lecture on Ministry](#).

Eden Theological Seminary Archives
475 E. Lockwood Ave.
St. Louis, Missouri 63119
(314) 252.3141

<https://www.eden.edu/the-archives-at-eden-theological-seminary/>