

Cancer silences Horn's voice

Religious leader fought for justice

By Virginia Culver
Denver Post Staff Writer

The Rev. Gilbert Horn, one of Denver's most influential religious leaders, died Sunday evening at his home after a long battle with esophageal cancer.

Horn, 57, was co-pastor of Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church for five years and before that was director of the Colorado Council of Churches for seven years.

A tireless worker for interfaith cooperation, racial and social justice, Horn also worked for the rights of gays, marched with Downtown janitors seeking better wages and spent a night on the streets to find out what it was like to be homeless.

"His was a voice that had to be listened to when it came to justice and what is right," said the Rev. Clyde Miller, Horn retired executive of the Rocky Mountain district, United Church of Christ.

"He was a very dear friend," said Mohammad Jodeh, former president of the Colorado Muslim Society. "He never gave up on things. He absolutely was wonderful getting religions working together."



"Witty and charming," was how Bob Feeney described Horn, who worked for years with Feeney on the long-running KMGH-Channel 7 "House of the Lord" television program. "This is a great loss for the religious community," said Feeney, former spokesman for the Denver Catholic Archdiocese.

"Gil was every place and did a remarkable job," said the Rev. Lucia Guzman, who succeeded Horn on the council. "I'm stunned and personally saddened. A voice that worked for human rights, pluralism and interfaith relationships has been silenced."

Rabbi Brant Rosen, of B'nai Itavurah Synagogue in east Denver, called Horn "fearless politically, not afraid of speaking his convictions publicly and taking hits. His politics and his faith were one and the same."

"He was an incredibly sensitive individual in interfaith relationships, spending time to really understand the Jewish point of view, whether it was a lofty theological idea or how to greet Jews on the High Holidays. He was a real mensch, which is Yiddish for a good man to his soul," Rosen said.

"He was a tremendous colleague, wonderful friend and one of the best pastors I have ever known," said the Rev. Cynthia Cearly, who was a co-pastor with Horn.

Horn came to Denver in 1986 from Buffalo, N.Y., to head the council. During legislative sessions he was a constant presence at the state Capitol to fight for issues the council was interested in, usually having to do with those who had no voice in society.

He fought against Amendment 2, which would have denied civil rights to gays, and pushed his own denomination to ordain gay men and women.

He had the idea of an interfaith chapel at Denver International Airport when the airport still was on the drawing boards. Working with Jews and Muslims, he helped persuade the city of Denver to build the nation's first airport chapel for all three faiths.

He was an organizer of the Denver Area Interfaith Clergy Conference, which brought Unitarians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists together. Even self-proclaimed witches were welcomed by Horn at the monthly meetings.

Horn was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus last year and underwent weeks of radiation and chemotherapy and then surgery. Late last fall he went back to work part-time, and preached two sermons Sunday and taught a Sunday school class at his Park Hill Church.

He became ill in the early evening and died before paramedics could revive him.

Born in Roanoke, Va., Horn graduated from Baltimore City College High School and the College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio, with a bachelor's degree in English literature. He earned his divinity degree at Princeton Theological Seminary and was ordained in 1965. He served churches in Norristown, Dublin and Deep Run, Pa., and Whippany, N.J. before going to Buffalo.

He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth; three sons, John, of Chicago, Gregory, of Buffalo, N.Y., and Peter, of Westfield, N.J.; and two stepchildren, Christina Rossiter, of San Antonio, Texas, and Rob Rossiter, of Huntington Mills, Pa. He also is survived by a brother, Tyler, in California.

Memorial services will be at 3 p.m. Saturday at Montview Presbyterian Church, 1980 Dahlia St.

Contributions may be made to Montview, at the above address, Denver, 80220 or to Metro Care-Ring, 730 21st St., Denver, 80205.

Horn battled for racial, social justice

Gil Horn: 1940-1998

In what turned out to have been the last of his many contributions to the commentary pages of The Post, the Rev. Gilbert Horn wrote a December letter to the editor urging journalists not to be shy about telling the story of how faith affects individual behavior.

It was a characteristic comment from Horn. The co-pastor of Montview Presbyterian Church and former executive director of the Colorado Council of Churches was for many years one of the state's most articulate spokesmen for the relevance of religion to daily life.

Both his public and private lives were touched with grace. He was cherished throughout the religious community, not only for his impassioned advocacy but for his personal charm and wit. A dedicated, and spirited, pianist, he was as likely to be found gathering friends for a sing-along in the Park Hill home he shared with his wife, Elizabeth, as he was presiding in the pulpit.

Horn came to Colorado to head the council of churches in 1986 after 20 years as a pastor to congregations in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York. He returned to pastoral work in 1993, when the Montview congregation elected him to become one of

its three co-pastors. At the time, he spoke of his excitement at moving to the Denver parish because of its tradition of ministering "beyond its walls."

As executive of the council, Horn built a record of tireless activity on a variety of fronts, speaking out on behalf of minorities, women, children and the homeless and on an array of issues related to peace and justice.

"The church has to stand in behalf of those ground down by the system, whether it's the government, the media or business," Horn once said. "Churches ask, push and prod. That's an appropriate relationship."

Timidity was never his trademark. But as he spoke out forthrightly on issues of conscience, he also built a reputation as a conciliator who knew the true meaning of peacemaking. In reaching beyond walls, he also reached beyond sectarian boundaries, and those who count themselves lessened by his death include not just traditional Protestants but Mormons; Roman Catholics, Jews and Muslims, as well.

Gil Horn made a lifelong witness to his faith. The five-word biography he once applied to Jesus may well have provided the model for his own life: "He went about doing good."

In this column alone is The Denver Post's opinion expressed.

Rev. Gil Horn, social activist, dies at 57

Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church co-pastor had suffered cancer since May

By Jean Torkelson

Rocky Mountain News Religion Writer

Although he didn't feel well Sunday morning, the Rev. Gil Horn preached two sermons and taught a Sunday school class at



Horn

Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church, where he was co-pastor.

A student, knowing Horn had been fighting esophageal cancer since May, complimented him on

looking so well.

"That," replied Horn, "is because I'm a showman."

Showman, social activist and

man of God, 57-year-old Gil Horn died Sunday night at home, leaving behind a legacy that combined fierce community awareness with a pastor's heart.

The Roanoke, Va., native came to Denver in 1986 to head the Colorado Council of Churches. He immediately became a reckoning force in an array of social-justice issues, taking on the fights of non-unionized workers, the homeless, gays and minorities.

He pushed for an interfaith cha-

pel at Denver International Airport — the first in the nation to include Christians, Muslims and Jews — and established a variety of interfaith conferences.

"The thing I liked about Gil, you never had to ask him where he stood. He was always out front," said Rabbi Steven Foster, who helped plan many protests with Horn.

Out front on social issues, Horn

See HORN on 9A

'John, today is a good day to die'

HORN from 4A

still missed the kind of one-on-one relationships he had fostered as pastor in Pennsylvania and in Buffalo, N.Y. So five years ago, Horn resigned his council post to join a staff of pastors at Montview.

"His first day at Montview, he went out on hospital calls and came back glowing," recalled his wife, Elizabeth, a social activist in her own right. "It's certainly not what I would want to do, but it (energized) him."

She said Horn had been enjoying a good book and a cup of tea when he collapsed Sunday evening.

If he had sensed the end was near, Horn reacted Sunday with his usual forthrightness. Before services that morning, he leveled a glance on one of the church's fellow ministers and boomed: "John, today is a good day to die."

"It was like being told my brother had died," said the Rev. Lucia Guzman, who succeeded Horn at the Council of Churches.

As a student at Iliff School of Theology, Guzman said, she had sat in on many human-rights conferences featuring Horn. She never dreamed they would one day have a close working relationship.

Perhaps no single issue brought out Horn's own assertiveness more than race relations.

Muhammed Jodeh, president of the Colorado Muslim Society, recalled how Horn, a personal

friend, had gone out of his way to defend Muslims.

Around the time American troops were attacked in Beirut, Lebanon, Horn mentioned to a luncheon guest that he was meeting Jodeh later that day.

The appalled guest wanted to know how Horn could sit down to lunch with a Muslim.

"Have you ever met a Muslim? How can you pass judgment?" Horn shot back. He began sending the man Islamic publications and arranging meetings with local Muslims.

"In a couple of years, he had turned that man from a very frightened person into a friend," recalled Jodeh.

Like a good pastor, Horn knew it was important to express his passions in a way people could relate to, said fellow pastor Cindy Cearley, a Montview pastor for 15 years.

And for many people Sunday, that meant football.

"He was not a football fan at all," said Cearley. But Horn's sermon Sunday revolved around "Jesus's game plan," Cearley recalled. He even spoke of Jesus as his quarterback.

"It was not an image he would have ordinarily used," she said. "But he did that, knowing it would touch people where they were."

Services will be at 3 p.m. Saturday at Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church.