

## J. Robert Nelson, theologian and BU professor, dean

By Gloria Negri

GLOBE STAFF

The Rev. John Robert Nelson, a Methodist theologian known for his role in the ecumenical movement and in bioethics and medical ethics as they relate to theology, died of cancer on July 6 at a Hous- ton hospital. He was 84.

Rev. Nelson, who preferred to be known as J. Robert Nelson, was professor at Boston University School of Theology from 1965 to 1985 and served as dean from 1972 to 1974.

He was dean of Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville from 1957 to 1960, where he assembled a faculty of some of America's leading theological scholars.

At Vanderbilt, Rev. Nelson established himself as a staunch supporter of civil rights when he resigned as dean in protest of the school's dismissal of an African-American student who organized sit-in demonstrations. "Robert Nelson was at the center of the crisis at Vanderbilt," said the former student, James Lawson. "He handled the crisis with poise, Christian strength, and character."

Arriving at BU at the height of the civil rights movement, Rev. Nelson "encouraged faculty and students to actively participate in enacting social and political change," said his son Eric of Berwyn, Pa. "He challenged the faculty to recognize that theology schools constitute a nexus for university, the church, and civic society."

"Father was dedicated to the social issues in the world and he wanted to see the church make a positive impact on those issues," Rev. Nelson's son said. "He traveled the world to meet with leaders of churches and government organizations to discuss new initiatives for the church to be useful. He was present at the creation of

the most extensive and durable form of international ecumenical work, the World Council of Churches, in 1948."

Robert Nesmith, who succeeded Rev. Nelson as dean at BU, said he made "a rich and diverse contribution to the life of the church, both as an ecumenical leader and teacher."

At various times, the Nelson family lived in Geneva, India, Paris, and Rome while Rev. Nelson worked to build bridges of understanding among the world's religions. "Between father's teaching at Princeton University and coming to Boston we spent a year in India where he was carrying on a dialogue between Protestant and Indian churches and meeting with Protestant missionaries," his son said.

In 1969, the family lived in Paris, where Rev. Nelson was visiting minister at the American Church, and in 1968 he taught for a year at Rome's Gregorian University, "the first Protestant theologian to teach at the Vatican in 400 years," his son said.

"Bob Nelson was a major presence on the world stage of the ecumenical movement," said retired Tufts Professor Howard Hunter. "His contributions to the World Council of Churches were many and varied, both in his role as delegate and as officer, and as an influential advocate in speeches and writings and educational administration for many decades."

Rev. Nelson was born in Wino- na Lake, Ind., one of three children of William and Agnes (Soder- borg) Nelson. His father was also an ordained Methodist minister, Eric said, as well as an inventor of paints and a car salesman. Rev. Nelson went to school in Evans- ton, Ill., where he was an out- standing student and athlete. "He taught camp in the north woods of the Midwest," Eric Nelson said.



REV. JOHN ROBERT NELSON

"He grew up in the Depression and the family went from boom to bust several times. It made him very frugal and practical."

Rev. Nelson graduated from DePauw University in Indiana, where he was a football All-American. Years later, Sports Illustrated awarded Rev. Nelson its Golden Jubilee Award for Excellence in Football.

He earned a master's degree in theology from Yale, where he met his future wife, Patricia (Mercer), who was attending Yale's School of Public Health. In 1943, Rev. Nelson joined the Marines as a chaplain and served in the South Pacific and in China. He gave the first Christian service in a temple in what was then Peking, his son said.

Rev. Nelson was ordained in Chicago in 1944 and earned his doctorate at the University of Zurich in Switzerland in 1948, where he studied under the famed theologian, Emil Brunner. "Brunner was part of a new theological movement that emphasized the importance of the personal spiritual experience in Christian salvation and the importance of the fellowship of people in the church,"

Eric Nelson said. In 1951, working from these themes, Rev. Nelson wrote "The Realm of Redem- tion."

In the 1970s, while at BU, Rev. Nelson became involved in the new field of bioethics, relating theological understanding to the science of genetics and medical technology.

"In the early days of gene-clon- ing in the 1970s and 1980s," his son said, "he worked with a variety of National Institute of Health panels to produce ethical and religious guidelines to help scientists and the public understand the religious perspective on the cloning of genes and genomics research and their use in biomedicine and agriculture. . . . He made a substantial contribution to dialogue between modern scientists and religious leaders by assembling a World Council of Churches confer- ence at the Massachusetts Insti- tute of Technology in 1978.

"Father discerned before many others the urgent need for theo- logians to address the issues that came with the explosion of tech- nological medical situations."

In 1985, Rev. Nelson became director of the Institute of Religion at the Texas Medical Center in Houston, which provides training for religious and medical caregivers in the spiritual aspects of patient care.

In his office there in 1991, Rev. Nelson was shot and critically injured by a disgruntled employee, who was jailed for the assault. "That debilitated his health and caused his retirement," Eric Nelson said.

Besides his son, Rev. Nelson leaves his wife; another son, Wil- liam of Los Angeles, and two grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held at 11 a.m. Saturday at St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Houston.