



Obituary: Bruce Bickel, Bible teacher and PNC Bank managing director



RICK NOWLIN ✓

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rnowlin@post-gazette.com

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The life of the Rev. Bruce Bickel was full of twists and turns — from Navy pilot to pastor and wealth management professional. But to many Pittsburghers, he will be remembered as a gifted, passionate — and extremely popular — Bible teacher.

Rev. Bickel, 82, of Scott, died Nov. 24 of pneumonia, a complication of treatment for melanoma, said his wife Rebecca, a pediatrician.

Born Roger Bruce Bickel in Fairmont, W.Va., to a fairly religious family — his mother was an organist for a local Methodist church — he would go on to the U.S. Naval Academy, immediately following Heisman Trophy winner Roger Staubach at quarterback but also playing basketball and baseball and graduating in 1966 with a degree in electrical engineering.

His original dream of being a Navy pilot was cut short due to injuries he suffered after being shot down in Vietnam during a rescue mission.

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Turning to the professional ministry, he went on to earn a master of divinity and a doctorate in theology from Luther Rice Seminary in Atlanta, spending a year at Oxford University. He served as pastor of Baptist churches in Kansas and Illinois and in numerous capacities with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

In the late 1980s, Rev. Bickel wanted to move closer to his aging parents but couldn't find a church to pastor.

Coincidentally, an unusual opportunity opened up in Pittsburgh. The wealth management division of PNC Bank starting a program to direct private foundation funds to appropriate charities. "They wanted a non-banker; they wanted to find someone with a heart," his wife said.

So he became managing director of the Private Foundation Management Services Group, a position he held until his retirement around 2015.

But even though he was in a secular job, Rev. Bickel never lost his passion for teaching the Bible, so he became involved in several off-hours groups and affected numerous lives in the process.

Doug Wicker, of Sewickley, now executive vice president for credit risk review at PNC Bank but originally hired out of college in 1998 as a management trainee, was involved in a lunchtime Bible study that outgrew its original room at PNC Bank, Downtown, and ended up at First Presbyterian Church.

Rev. Bickel was "a true role model [exhibiting] servant leadership," Mr. Wicker said, influencing him to be "a better husband, better father, better employee, better churchman — other than my parents, Bruce was the one with the most influence on me.

“As that Bible study grew, he started to mentor me and teach me [how to teach]. As his health declined, we split the teaching 50-50.” The group still meets, although mostly through Zoom.

Rev. Bickel would also teach at the now-defunct Brave Men group, which began in 1995. It met at 6:30 a.m. Fridays originally at World Vision headquarters in Aleppo but, because of its popularity, moved to Christ Church at Grove Farm in Ohio Township.

Sig Tragard of Stanton Heights, who hosted that group, said, “He made it simple to understand the [Christian] faith,” delivering nearly 500 one-liners later known as “Bickelisms.” Mr. Tragard said that over 900 different men attended that group over its 30-year history.

Over time, Rev. Bickel would also serve as interim pastor for a number of Presbyterian churches, specifically Memorial Park in McCandless, Peters Creek in Peters and Bellefield in Oakland — though a Baptist, he never had a problem crossing denominational lines.

Rev. Bickel also is survived by a stepson; Bill Morris; a stepdaughter, Amelia Morris; and two step-grandchildren. A memorial service was held Dec. 13, coincidentally on the same day as the annual Army-Navy football game, at Mt. Lebanon Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

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Rick Nowlin is a staff writer for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

✉ rnowlin@post-gazette.com