

James Parks Morton, Dean Who Brought a Cathedral to Life, Dies at 89

Leading the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine for 25 years, he sought to make it central to urban life.

By Ari L. Goldman

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The Very Rev. James Parks Morton, who in 25 years as dean of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in Upper Manhattan transformed it from a religious backwater into a vibrant center for the arts, the homeless, circus performers, household pets, endangered animals and interfaith engagement, died on Saturday at his home in Manhattan. He was 89.

His death was confirmed by his daughter Polly Morton Barton. She said he had been treated for Alzheimer's disease.

St. John the Divine, the seat of the Episcopal diocese of New York, sits on a 13-acre campus in Morningside Heights. It is said to be the largest Gothic cathedral in the world and one of the biggest church buildings anywhere.

Mr. Morton was appointed dean in 1972 by the new bishop of the diocese, the Rev. Paul Moore Jr. Together they re-envisioned the church as "a medieval cathedral for New York City" that would engage the city in all its promise and problems.

At the time, there were probably more problems than promise. New York City was in the midst of a financial crisis that almost drove it to bankruptcy. The cathedral itself, sitting between Columbia University and Morningside Park, with Harlem beyond, was a symbol of the city's stagnancy. Even a century after its cornerstone had been laid, the building was unfinished. What had been built was largely unused, and it sat on a neglected piece of property.



St. John the Divine as seen from across Amsterdam Avenue. Dean Morton envisioned it as "a medieval cathedral for New York City" that would be a force for social and cultural good. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

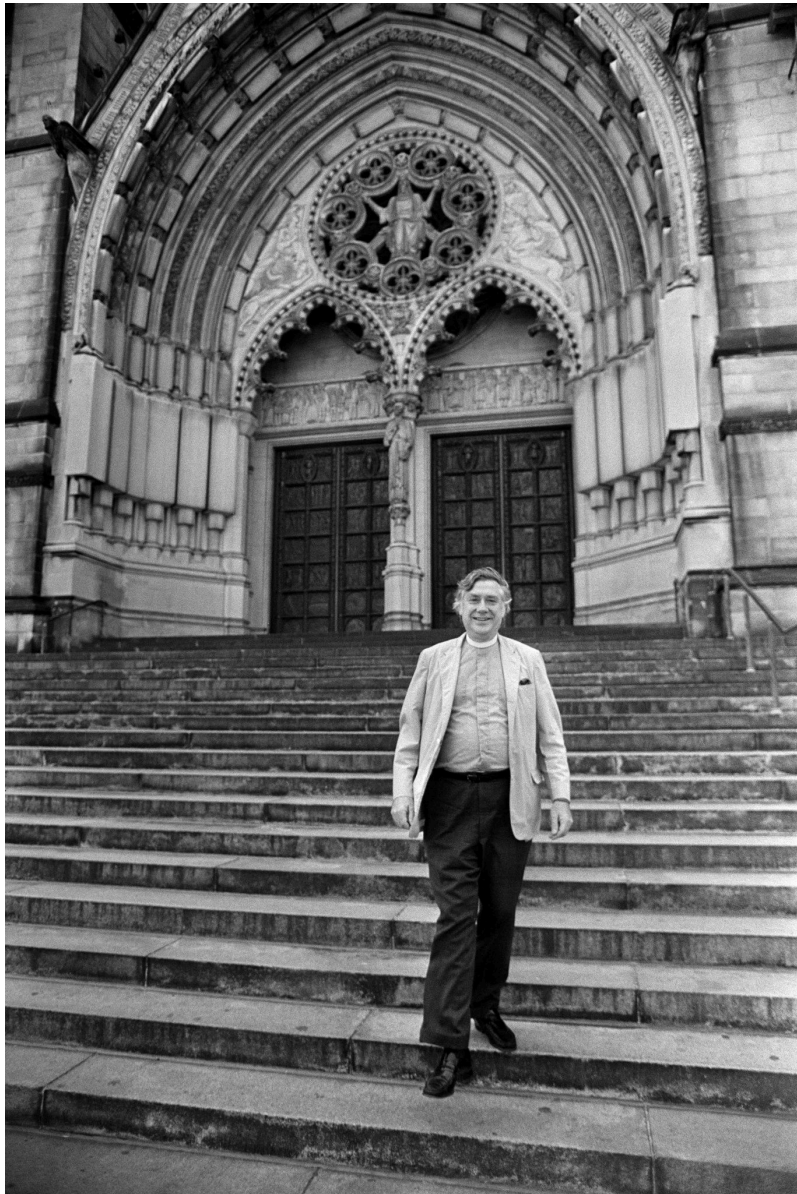
"His cathedral was on the urban margin," Matthew Weiner, an associate dean at Princeton University, wrote about Dean Morton in his doctoral dissertation about religious life in New York City, "but, through his own jagged sense of curiosity and showmanship, he transformed this crippling fact into an asset by inventing projects that involved those from the surrounding communities in inventive ways."

Dean Morton opened a homeless shelter on the cathedral grounds, but he also wanted to empower the poor by creating the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board, an organization devoted to helping people rebuild, occupy and own their own apartments in abandoned buildings.

On the cultural side, he founded music and dance programs, turning the cathedral into a cultural destination. The genre-crossing Paul Winter Consort began offering its annual winter Solstice Celebration during the Morton era; it just celebrated its 40th annual concert in December.

In 1979, Dean Morton began a program for unemployed young residents of Harlem and Newark to train with master stonemasons to continue construction of the cathedral towers.

“We will resume building this great house of God,” he said at the time, “and revive the dying art of stone craft by teaching it to the young people of our neighborhood.” The program, which involved scores of apprentices, lasted several years before it ran out of money.



Dean Morton outside the cathedral in 1986. He opened a homeless shelter on its grounds, started music and dance programs and recruited disadvantaged youths to learn the craft of stonemasonry. Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

Dean Morton once said that the cathedral’s vastness places matters in proportion.

“Humility is kind of an asinine word in a way, but a cathedral does make one humble in a sense,” he said. “It’s terribly important to realize you can’t complete it.”

Dean Morton gave over the cathedral’s great stone pulpit to a variety of speakers, among them the homeless, women and gay people (even before they were officially accepted as clergy in the Episcopal Church). He invited in Roman Catholic priests, rabbis, imams and leaders of other faiths. Among the guest preachers were the Nobel laureates Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Elie Wiesel and the Dalai Lama.

The Blessing of the Animals on St. Francis Day was another innovation introduced by Dean Morton. Elephants, llamas as well as neighborhood dogs, cats and goldfish (in bowls) were brought in for the annual event. The elephants came from the Big Apple Circus, which, for a time, found its off-season home at the cathedral.

Philippe Petit, the French aerialist, was among the cathedral’s artists-in-residence. He performed on a wire high above the cathedral stone floor at its centennial and on other occasions.

Kusumita Pedersen, a scholar of religion who worked on interfaith programs with Dean Morton, said that social justice had remained at the core of everything he did. "He told me, 'My conservative wealthy donors forgive me all the social justice programs if I give them the arts.'" For several years running he brought Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic to the cathedral on New Year's Eve.



Dean Morton at his final service at the cathedral as its leader, on Dec. 29, 1996. Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

For some he sometimes pushed the envelope too far. In one incident, in 1984, his installation of a bronze figure of a crucified woman with bare breasts in the cathedral led to accusations of sacrilege from some quarters of the church.

But Bishop Moore backed up his dean, if cautiously. "I won't say I agree with everything he has done, but I support him," he said in a 1987 interview. "If I fettered him, this wouldn't be the dynamic place that it is, although sometimes this dynamism gives us gray hairs."

And while many in the church embraced Dean Morton's introduction of the Blessing of the Animals, some rolled their eyes when he followed that up with a blessing for algae in 1988. A flask, labeled "anabaena flosaqua," holding some 10 billion algae was carried into the cathedral along with a 14-foot-tall ginkgo tree, its roots wrapped in burlap.

Bishop Moore blessed them both.

James Parks Morton was born on Jan. 7, 1930, in Houston to Virginia May (Parks) Morton, a homemaker, and Vance M. Morton, who at one point served as director of theater arts at Brooklyn College. James attended Philips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire and Harvard College.

In 1950, when he was a college senior majoring in architecture, he heard a speech that changed his life. It was by Mr. Moore.

“He heard Paul tell the story about St. Martin giving his cloak to the poor,” his daughter Ms. Barton said. “For a time, my father turned the squash court in the basement of Eliot House into a chapel,” she added, referring to the Harvard student residence.



Dean Morton outside his home in 1996, after announcing he would step down as head of the church. James Estrin/The New York Times

Along with Ms. Barton, Mr. Morton is survived by his wife of 65 years, Pamela Taylor Morton; two other daughters, Sophia and Maria Morton; eight grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. A fourth daughter, Hilary Morton Shontz, died in 2010.

Dean Morton received a theology degree from Cambridge University and studied later at General Theological Seminary in New York. He was ordained in 1954. Before moving to the cathedral in 1972, he served as a priest in Jersey City and, for eight years, as the director of the Urban Training Center for Christian Mission in Chicago.

He stepped down as dean of the cathedral at the end of 1996 and immediately founded the Interfaith Center of New York, which promotes mutual understanding among religions. He was succeeded at the center by the Rev. Chloe Breyer.

The center presents the James Parks Morton Award annually; its recipients have included musicians like Mr. Winter, Philip Glass and Wynton Marsalis; religious leaders like the Dalai Lama and Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf; and writers like Bill Moyers and Nick Kristof. The award honors people who are “bold and courageous,” Ms. Breyer said in an interview.

“Jim thought big,” she said. “He did not do too many things on a small scale.”

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