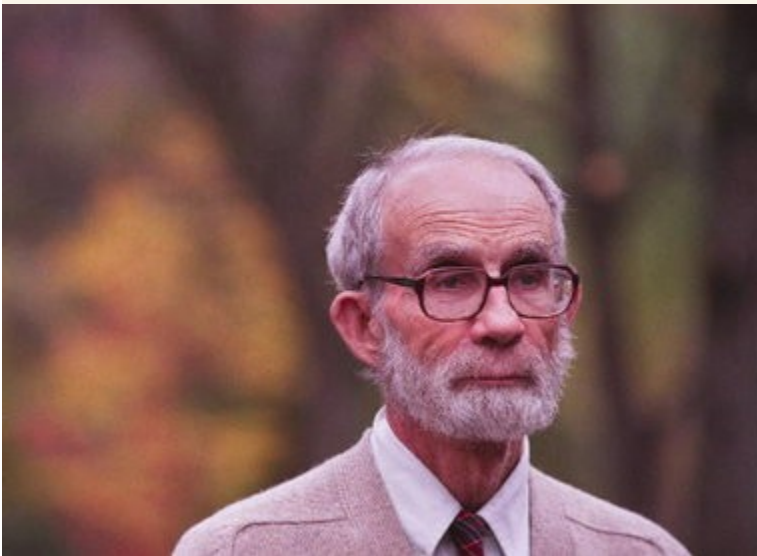


2011-06-00 David Duncombe - Life Story

Life story: Listening to his conscience, David C. Duncombe ministered at medical schools, protested arms shipments and fasted for debt relief



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Ross William Hamilton, The Oregonian The Rev. David Duncombe fasted for 45 days in 1999 and lobbied Congress to forgive the debts of impoverished countries.

When David Cameron Duncombe was still a teen-ager, on the first of two European tours in the U.S. Army, he had what he called a "conversion experience."

Walking away from the post exchange with his "weekly ration of chocolate bars" in his satchel, he crossed a small stone bridge. Suddenly, he was surrounded with young boys chanting, "Chocolate. Chocolate." Initially, Duncombe kept walking.

"But something inside seemed to snap," he recalled later and he thought, "I can't go on living like this. From that moment, I knew my life had to be one of giving to others."

Duncombe, 82, died Saturday at his home in White Salmon, Wash., surrounded by his family. A dedicated social activist and retired medical school chaplain, he had suffered for years with lung problems after contracting tuberculosis during one of his many jail stays. He died just a few days after learning he had cancer.

Duncombe, born July 14, 1928, in New York City, graduated from

[Dartmouth College](#)

and attended

[Union Theological Seminary in New York City](#)

when noted theologian

[Reinhold Neibuhr](#)

was on the faculty. Duncombe was ordained in the

[United Church of Christ](#)

in 1958, but he didn't pastor congregations.

He was a chaplain at

[The Taft School](#)

in Watertown, Conn., earned a doctorate at

[Yale Divinity School](#)

and was hired as the first chaplain at

[Yale's School of Medicine](#)

. He enrolled for a year just to get the feel of it and worked alongside medical students as they dissected cadavers. At the end of the school year, Duncombe held a memorial service for the bodies, which several students attended.

"It's a funny thing when you are with a cadaver," Duncombe remembered later. "There's a kind of emotional attachment. You can't just walk out of the lab on the last day."

Duncombe spent 25 years as a medical school chaplain, the last several at the [University of California, San Francisco](#)

. He retired in 1993 and moved with his wife to White Salmon.

He and the former Sally Morton were married in 1958 and celebrated their 47th anniversary before she died in 2005.

"She was attentive to our family so he could be attentive to the world," his daughter, Betsy Duncombe, says. "She was an unsung hero. She was there as his daily and continual support. He couldn't have done what he did without her."

In the 1960s, Duncombe worked briefly registering voters during the civil rights movement. In San Francisco, he regularly protested in the 1980s as trains and trucks carrying munitions bound for Central America left the Naval Weapons Station in Concord, Calif. He said later that he had been arrested about 100 times in six years.

Duncombe was present when a fellow protester,

[S. Brian Willson](#)

, was struck by a train in 1987.

"We thought they would stop," Duncombe told a reporter at the time. "He lunged for the train, like he was angry." The accident, in which Willson lost both legs, prompted the first of several fasts that Duncombe undertook in his

lifetime. He fasted for 40 days, over and over again, to call attention to injustice.

In his later years,

[he fasted three times in Washington, D.C.,](#)

in support of debt relief for impoverished nations. He told a reporter in 2000 that his debt relief fasts were the result of learning that 19,000 children died every day of starvation in sub-Saharan Africa.

"You can talk about hunger in the United States, and there is hunger, but my God, it's not starvation," he said.

Duncombe visited Congressional offices several times during each fast, establishing a relationship with staffers so that they would notice him growing weaker over time. Eventually, he used a cane to make the rounds. When his face grew gaunt, people would comment.

"Only then would I say why I'm doing it," he said. "Words are cheap and words are plentiful in Washington," he said, "but prayer and fasting are not."

After he retired, Duncombe was actively involved with about 20 groups, acting as volunteer electrician and plumber for a homeless shelter near White Salmon, helping build houses for Habitat for Humanity and creating paths for an environmental group.

"He had a key ring with about 50 keys," his daughter says, at least one for every group he served. Duncombe asked that his body be used for medical dissection. He is survived by his three children, Betsy of Kauai, Hawaii; Jane of Parkdale; Steve of New York City; and four grandchildren.

A memorial service was held Friday at

[Riverside Community Church, United Church of Christ](#)

, in Hood River. Remembrances may be contributions to the Hospice of the Gorge or a social justice charity.

"He had an awareness that his conscience had to be his strongest voice at all times," Betsy Duncombe says. "He deferred to it always."

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[Nancy Haught](#)