

NEWS

'One of us.' Pastor, LGBTQ activist who offered 'safe place' dies

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Rev. Derek Terry, a Cincinnati pastor known across the country for his [LGBTQ+ activism](#), has died.

Terry, 42, served as a Christian pastor at [St. Peter's United Church of Christ](#) in Pleasant Ridge and died over the weekend. His last Sunday service was on Aug. 2, according to a Facebook post from the church. Friends and colleagues who spoke to The Enquirer weren't able to confirm the cause or date of his death.

What they did say, however, was that Terry made an undeniable impact here and across the country with LGBTQ+ inclusion, and with personal hope.

In 2015, Terry came out as gay to his congregation – and more than a million TV viewers – on the Oprah Winfrey Network show, “Iyanla: Fix My Life.” He appeared [on the show again in 2020](#) as part of a “where are they now” episode.

“Growing up Black and queer, I actually saw him on TV just before I went through a divorce from my wife, before I came out, and it was a whole thing to see it was possible,” said his longtime friend Jamond Foree. “Something I thought was completely impossible – to figure out how to live reconciled with my faith, and my community, and my identity at the same time.”

Terry authored several works, starting with his 2015 collection of essays, [“God Loves Me And So Do I.”](#) Companions, colleagues and church members described

him as a leader, speaker, advocate, artist, caring pastor and friend.

A [statement posted](#) on the United Church of Christ website confirmed Terry's "untimely passing" and called him a "powerful voice" on topics like civil rights, racial and social justice, and LGBTQ+ inclusion. In 2019, [Terry spoke at Cincinnati's annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day](#) commemoration at Music Hall, weaving Maya Angelou's poem "The Mask" into his 40-minute sermon.

"His preaching and teachings called people to deeper compassion, creative resistance, and a more inclusive vision of the church," the statement read. "His big heart, warm spirit, and passion for bringing justice to the world will be missed by all who knew, worked alongside, and partnered with him in the struggle."

A memorial service honoring Terry's life will be held Aug. 20 at 1 p.m. at First Church United Church of Christ in College Hill. A second service will take place in Terry's native city of Louisville, Kentucky, on Aug. 22.

Friends mourn pastor, activist who cared for so many

Inside and outside of St. Peter's, Terry was affectionately known as "Rev." by his congregation and friends.

Foree and Terry became friends while organizing Cincinnati Black Pride in 2018. Foree said Terry's perspective as a gay, Black, Christian man was needed in Cincinnati.

"For some of us," he said, those worlds "existed sort of in conflict, and he was able to say he did that work not in conflict, but in confirmation of who he was."

"While there are many congregations in Cincinnati that are open and affirming, there are very few people that look like the Rev. Derek Terry," Foree said.

Foree and other friends said Terry was supportive, nonjudgmental and pushed them to be their best selves. Terry was great at connecting people and loved trying

new things. He went from taking a drawing class to selling his artwork, and ran a blog about fashion and body positivity.

"Everything he did, he did it all the way," Foree said.

As a pastor, he probed his congregation with thought-provoking questions and expecting an answer, said St. Peter's member Sara Bourgeois.

"He had a relationship with every single person," she said. "His church community, though it looks small, his broader community is enormous. He took care of so many people."

Foree said Terry's presence will continue to be felt in the events and communities he helped create.

"While his physical space is not there, I'm never going to walk into a space where people feel loved and affirmed and not think of Derek Terry," Foree said.

'One of us.' Pastor brought 'light and love' to Cincinnati LGBTQ+ community

Michael Chanak Jr., a local activist who advocated for P&G to include LGBTQ+ employees in its equal employment policy in the 1980s, said Terry stood out for his authenticity.

"We live in a world of performance. Look at Facebook, social media," he said. "And then there's the real world. People that have actually seen it, experienced it. And I think that's what he brought home to people: That he was, if you will, one of us."

"People need a safe place," Chanak added. "Especially in these times, where people are feeling afraid and need a space – he was the guy."

Tristan Vaught met Terry through work at the University of Cincinnati's [LGBTQ Center](#). Vaught is the cofounder of [Transform](#), a Cincinnati-based nonprofit that,

among other services, helps [provide new wardrobes for trans youth](#) and offers a gathering space for support and fun.

"It knocked the wind out of us," Vaught said about learning of Terry's death. "It's going to be a massive loss for us moving forward because Derek was someone who brought light and love into every space."

Terry was a featured speaker at the group's November event [Trans Day of Resilience](#), which honored the memory of trans people whose lives were lost to acts of anti-transgender violence. Terry was especially good at delivering remarks that balanced the heaviness of the day with a message of resilience and hope, Vaught said.

"Derek always did an amazing job of balancing that," Vaught said. "Being able to respect and hold space, but then remember that there's joy and love and light in the world."

Pastor 'sparked' inclusivity at Pleasant Ridge church

St. Peter's congregation was "a little clunky" when Terry was hired as its pastor roughly 13 years ago, Bourgeois said. For its first 125 years, St. Peter's was a German Evangelical church with a white congregation. When Bourgeois joined 20 years ago, it was finding its footing after merging with a Methodist church and a Black Pentecostal congregation.

Bourgeois, a longtime member of the church council, was part of the team that interviewed and hired Terry.

"It was very evident that he was the guy," she recalled.

As with any new pastor, some people left the church and others joined under Terry, Bourgeois said. Before coming out as gay on TV, Terry was already building on previous pastors' work to unify the new, diverse congregation. After his TV

appearance, he "sparked" a move toward LGBTQ+ inclusivity that members were ready to embrace, Bourgeois said.

"He gave us a framework and a push, and the structure to actually do the work and get it done," she said. "You can't just say everyone is welcome. You have to *be* welcoming."

For at least the past five years, St. Peter's has displayed Trans Pride flags for Trans Day of Remembrance. Under Terry, the church joined the [Open and Affirming Coalition](#), a national nonprofit in covenant with the United Church of Christ that promotes LGBTQ+ inclusion within the church.

Bishop-elect Lesley Jones, [a Cincinnati faith leader](#) and pastor at [Truth and Destiny](#) in Mount Airy, recruited Terry to be a coalition board member. He went on to serve as its executive director.

Jones described Terry as a "gentle giant who loved people" and a "caring and supportive" pastor. They became fast friends as two of the few Black pastors within the United Church of Christ in Greater Cincinnati, she said.

"Often times we don't know the greatness that was right in our midst," Jones said. "Derek was that."

In the roughly 50-person, tightknit church, Terry's absence was felt immediately.

"Who's gonna provide the message of positivity, and warmth, and welcome in our church?" asked Bourgeois, whose daughter was baptized by Terry. "Who's gonna be the face of our church?"

Bourgeois and others said St. Peter's will continue to be a welcoming place for the LGBTQ+ community.

"He's going to be tremendously missed," Jones said, "but I've seen that he planted deep seeds in people that will continue his legacy."

