

## FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

A. James Fuller & Rebecca Blair '80



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# *Bruce Hilton '53*

Throughout his career as a writer, medical ethicist, and ordained minister, Bruce Hilton has fought for social justice. Often controversial, sometimes frustrated in his efforts, yet always a hard worker, the eldest of the three Hilton brothers defines service as the “effort that you put forth for the good of others,” a definition embodied in his life’s work. Yet, Hilton recognizes that service is something that is done “for your own good, too, of course.” His work has been motivated not only by his Christian faith, but also by the knowledge that service brings “real satisfaction.”

Bruce Hilton set an example for his younger brothers by carrying on the family tradition of Christian service. Born in 1930 in Plymouth, Wisconsin, Bruce was the oldest of three sons of a United Brethren minister and his wife. Vern and Mary Hilton raised his boys to focus on helping others and modeled his faith for them in his own life. Bruce Hilton remembers that

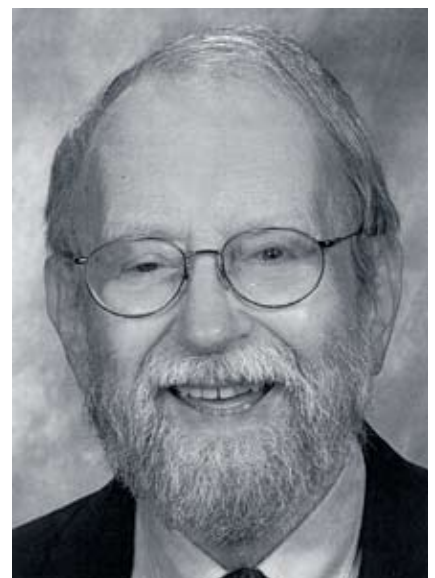
“social action and the idea of the Gospel having a national impact” was emphasized at home. A clear demonstration of this viewpoint was his father’s actions during the 1920s, the era of Prohibition. A triumphant hallmark of the Progressive movement that attempted to eradicate sin and the excesses of capitalism in the early 20th century, Prohibition began when the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and the Volstead Act outlawed the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcoholic beverages in 1918 and 1919. Progressives declared that their legislation of morality would bring an end to the social ills wrought by the evil of alcohol. But history is often ironic, marked by the unintended consequences of good intentions. Instead of stopping alcohol production and distribution, Prohibition expanded and empowered organized crime, as bootleggers and gangsters began to supply the alcoholic drinks that millions of Americans wanted. While many citizens believed that Prohibition went too far, that the federal government had no right to interfere with the personal choice to consume alcohol, most Protestant churches supported the effort.

In southeastern Wisconsin, Reverend Hilton faced the issue head-on when associates of the notorious Chicago mobster, Al Capone, decided to set up a distillery in the area. Neighboring communities had witnessed the establishment of similar illegal operations, as local officials and citizens looked the other way, either because they did not believe that the Prohibition law was just or because they appreciated the large influx of money into the local economy. But Reverend Hilton would have no part of it. He openly resisted the Capone organization and called upon his parishioners to help fight the plans to open the distillery. He then sent a letter to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, urging them to stop the illegal activity.

Soon after, a representative of the Capone mob visited the Hilton home, making veiled threats against the family if the minister did not stop his crusade against the distillery. Undaunted, Reverend Hilton continued his campaign. His efforts paid off when the FBI closed down the distillery a short time later.

Like most reformers in the Progressive era, the Reverend Hilton also believed strongly in the importance of education, a belief which applied more strongly nowhere than in his own family. Bruce Hilton remembers that “college was just a fact” and college meant Indiana Central College. Far from an onerous obligation, Reverend Hilton always “presented it [college matriculation at Indiana Central] in a welcome way” and created an “easy transition” to college life for Bruce, who looked forward to moving south to continue his studies because of the love of learning instilled in him by his parents. Bruce Hilton enjoyed college life at ICC because of the sense of community he felt upon arriving in Indianapolis. He recalls encountering “people who were friends right away.” Yet, again his father played an important role since, at one time, seven students from his home church were enrolled at Indiana Central. For a man who had never gone to college—indeed, had not even graduated from high school—Reverend Hilton played a central role in the education of others.

Perhaps the most important event in Bruce Hilton’s early days on campus occurred at the freshman mixer. Like so many students, he attended the social event to meet his classmates and to involve himself in campus life. Certainly there was nothing extraordinary about a first-year student participating in such an activity. This particular occasion, however, became a life-changing event, as the young man fell in love at the freshman mixer. Looking across the room, he was smitten by a young woman, about whom he found out more information as soon as possible. Her name was Virginia Young, and her father was an ICC graduate. Virginia was eventually to become Bruce Hilton’s wife.



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With his new love, working a full-time job, and taking classes, Bruce Hilton was a busy young man at Indiana Central. Despite the extracurricular distractions, however, Hilton remembers the influence of sociology professor Thomas Hoult. The professor was “not a church man,” Hilton observes, “but valued people highly,” teaching his courses in an open way that encouraged his students as well as challenged them to think for themselves. Other academic mentors at the college included the choir director, Allen Schirmer. In fact, Hilton found his time with the choir instilled an important lesson in the value of cooperation. Hilton also learned much about the dynamics of human interaction from his roommate, Byron Reed. Unaware of the motto “Education for Service” during his student days, Hilton nevertheless brought to bear on his academic life this “essential” concept from his family’s life. On campus, he found that the “air was filled with the idea of being here to serve,” and the subject of service “cropped up in all classes,” as students and faculty alike dedicated themselves to working for others. It was no accident, then, that Bruce Hilton would carry on his own career of service while studying at Indiana Central College.



While in high school, Hilton had been pushed toward journalism by one of his teachers, writing a bit for newspapers before coming to ICC. As a college student, he took a job at the *Indianapolis News*, initially writing obituaries and ending his career there as assistant city editor. His work featured a weekly column on church news that included his report on a Sunday visit to a different local church each week. This experience proved invaluable to the young man on his way to becoming a writer and activist concerned with current events and religious matters.

Hilton majored in sociology and minored in music at Indiana Central, believing he had “a strong call to the pastoral ministry.” Though his father’s example no doubt exerted a degree of influence, Hilton also “felt a sense of calling” while singing with a college quartet on a tour of southern Illinois churches. Despite his direct observation of his father’s career stresses and his own lack of enthusiasm at being under the continual authority of a bishop as an Evangelical United Brethren (and later, a United Methodist) pastor, Hilton still headed off to United Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, to pursue his calling. Hilton had accumulated five years of experience at the largest evening daily newspaper in Indiana by the time he

graduated from Indiana Central. And he continued his reporting while in seminary, working as a feature writer for the *Dayton Journal Herald*. Two years into his pursuit, in 1955, he happened to interview the editor of Otterbein Press, an interview that would mark “a crucial turning point” in Bruce Hilton’s life and career calling. Two weeks after the interview, the publisher called Hilton to ask if he would fill in as youth editor, since the previous journalist filling that position had died unexpectedly. Hilton readily accepted the invitation. Ordained in 1956, Hilton still pursued his journalism career. At age 24, he became youth editor for the official publisher of the Evangelical United Brethren Church. What was supposed to be a ten-month temporary position turned into an eleven-year appointment. During his tenure, Hilton completely revamped youth publishing for the church, developing *Friends* magazine, a publication designed specifically for young people.

By the mid-1950s, the Civil Rights movement was also underway. While in Dayton, Hilton became involved early on in the fight for fair housing and against segregated neighborhoods. This period was a volatile time in which to live and work. There was a neighborhood riot in the area adjacent to Bruce and Ginny Hilton’s home. Bruce and Virginia Hilton saw the racial conflict on TV—a couple hundred neighborhood whites shouting outside the home newly rented by an African American mother with two young children. Bruce talked with the police and with the woman. Upon learning that she was worried about her children’s safety, he volunteered to walk with them to school for a few days. It occurred to Bruce that he might wear a clergy collar, though that meant that he “had to go out and buy one.” (He reports that he never wore it again.) Word soon got out in the community that the young clergyman was active in the Civil Rights movement. Though his insurance company cancelled his coverage for window breakage, this and other more serious risks for taking such a stand were worthwhile.

Hilton intensified these risks by flying to Selma, Alabama, to take part in civil rights marches and demonstrations in the South. A month later, he received a call asking him to journey to Mississippi to work as a part of the Delta Ministry, an interfaith civil rights organization working with poor people in cotton plantations. Delta Ministry assisted in registering voters and training black citizens to run for office; it found housing for farm workers who had been evicted from plantations for registering to vote, etc. In 1965, he traveled to Greenville, Mississippi, with Virginia and the boys to teach oppressed blacks how to vote and to become active citizens. Hilton published a newsletter for the ministry, remaining in the heart of the Mississippi Delta in the midst of the Civil Rights controversy for “two years, two weeks, and five days.” That he remembers the exact length of his service so well indicates the significance of this event for Bruce Hilton. The white preacher’s kid from Wisconsin was carrying on the family tradition of fighting for social justice.

The Delta Ministry was carried out under the auspices of the National Council of Churches (NCC). Hilton’s involvement with this project led to another significant career experience.

The NCC hired Bruce Hilton to serve as Director of Interpretation for the World Committee on Literacy and Christian Literature. Although this position required him to spend most of his time working in a New York office, he did manage to travel to Africa to train Christian writers during his time in this position. Always curious and inclined toward public service, Hilton attended a weekend meeting on medical ethics sponsored by the Hastings Center, the leading institute for the study of medical ethics, in 1971 as he was running for a school board position. Intrigued by the issue of patient’s rights as this issue related to the larger concern of human rights in general, Hilton enthusiastically accepted an offer to serve as the editor for the Hastings Center.

This new phase of his life proved exciting for Hilton, who threw himself into his work with his trademark energy and determination, once again taking up his pen to fight for human justice. The Hastings Center, an elite organization, was structured to communicate with doctors, lawyers, and professors, rather than patients. Hilton's concern lay with serving the average people who were patients.

Bruce Hilton left the Hastings Center in 1973. He reports, "With the help of journalists from *The New York Times* and the *Saturday Review of Literature*, I founded the National Center for Bioethics (NCB), with headquarters at Drew University in Morristown, New Jersey (which later moved to California in 1976)." As Director of the NCB, Bruce Hilton wrote three more books (for a total of seven), lectured in 30 states as well as in England and Switzerland, conducted Bioethics Rounds as a consultant to six hospitals, and (for 15 years) wrote a weekly "Bioethics" column that was syndicated to newspapers across the country by Scripps-Howard News Service.

He continues to serve as a member of two ethics committees and attends their case conferences each month. His work in this field has centered on the major issues surrounding patient's rights, including the question of who has the right to decide medical issues—the patient or the doctor? Related medical issues such as pain control and addition, reproductive choice for women, genetics, stem cell research, cloning, and the ethics of experimentation on human subjects have also occupied Hilton's attention.

In addition to medical ethics, Hilton has discovered a "third career" since 1980 as he has become actively involved with the issue of gay rights and homosexuality in the church. Made sensitive to the complex concerns surrounding this issue when one of his children revealed a homosexual orientation, Hilton founded a national organization for Christian parents of gay children, the Parents Reconciling Network (PRN). He also advocated a strong position for gay rights in the United Methodist Church, carrying



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a sign at the General Conference that read, "My Child Is of Sacred Worth." Engaged with the issue as a writer, Hilton authored a book exploring the issue of whether or not homophobia can be "cured." He continues to fight for social justice on this controversial issue. In 1998, Bruce and Virginia Hilton were awarded the Ball Award, the highest recognition offered by the Methodist Federation for Social Action.

Now based in California, Bruce Hilton explains that he is currently "retiring slowly." He tries to spend more time with his music—a life-long passion—by playing the tuba in a New Orleans style jazz band. But his definition of gradual retirement means that he attends a variety of ethics conferences for four different hospitals as a consultant while continuing to regularly write. Even so, this pace is not as busy as a few years ago, when he served as a consultant to six hospitals and wrote a regular national newspaper column. No matter what form it takes, Hilton views his career as form of Christian service, maintaining that social justice work constitutes a

significant ministry. He characterizes himself as having "always been a troublemaker" as he fought against discrimination and injustice because of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Never a single-issue person, Hilton sees his life's work as an extension of his faith and dedication to service through social justice.

After a lifetime of significant service, Hilton advises today's students to "keep your eyes and ears open to the environment at school" and to "watch for people who seem to find satisfaction in their school work and those who know what they want to do and ask them why." He further encourages students not to "settle for happenstance. Opportunities will come for a fruitful life's work that will be truly satisfying, offering not only a living, but a life worth living." Bruce Hilton certainly has not settled for happenstance, but rather has engaged in a sustained fight for justice, a calling that continues to fulfill the family tradition of "Education for Service."

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- A (p. 26) Bruce Hilton in the aisle of a church playing the tuba (May 25, 1995). Personal photo of Bruce Hilton reprinted with his permission.
- B (p. 27) Formal Photo of Bruce Hilton (ca. 2002). Personal photo of Bruce Hilton reprinted with his permission.
- C (p. 28) Class Photo of Bruce Hilton from *The Oracle* yearbook (1953), p. 70. Photograph used with permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives of the University of Indianapolis.
- D (p. 29) Bruce and Virginia Hilton on hill overlooking the ocean (Nov. 7, 1998). Bruce and Virginia were awarded the annual Ball Award, the top honor of the Methodist Federation for Social Action. Personal photo used with permission of Bruce Hilton.