

Philadelphia Inquirer Obituary
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Rev. Edward A. Neiderhiser, 71, Lutheran pastor and chaplaincy director at Graterford

by [Bonnie L. Cook](#), Updated: May 3, 2019- 5:00 AM



The Rev. Edward Allen Neiderhiser, 71, of North Wales, a Lutheran pastor, musician, and longtime chaplaincy director at the now-closed Graterford Prison, died Wednesday, April 17, of a heart attack at Abington-Lansdale Hospital-Jefferson Health after collapsing at home.

Pastor Neiderhiser had a 42-year career in ministry. He earned a master of divinity degree from Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary in 1973 and a doctoral degree in philosophy in 1978 from Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, now the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies.

Ordained by the Lutheran Church in America in 1977, he served as associate pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Havertown and later at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in North Wales. He also served part-time in the mid-1980s at King's Way, a small church in North Philadelphia that needed a pastor.

Pastor Neiderhiser left his greatest mark at the maximum-security prison in Graterford, where he served as chaplain starting in 1989. After two years, he was named the chaplaincy program director, and he remained in that role for 25 years until retiring in 2016.

His friend and colleague Andreas Wagner, the pastor of St. Peter's, said Pastor Neiderhiser had a unique skill set that made him effective in a prison setting.

"He could preach Pentecostal style in prison and hold the audience's attention, but at the same time he was book-smart, academically trained, and knowledgeable in the Old Testament languages," Wagner said. "He brought the gift of humor and music to the prison ministry, and both gifts were extremely important in that context."

Pastor Neiderhiser was known for his unconditional acceptance of each inmate despite that person's shortcomings. He officiated at many weddings and funerals in prison.

Gary Olinger worked with Pastor Neiderhiser throughout his time at Graterford. Olinger is now corrections classification and program manager at the State Correctional Institution at Phoenix, the prison that opened last year, replacing Graterford.

“He was beloved by inmates, staff, and community volunteers and visitors,” Olinger said in an email. “The superintendents who were fortunate enough to have him relied on him to give them insight on how things were really going in the prison, as he and his chaplains had a good, honest feel for inmate morale and concerns, due to the nature of their position in this environment. “The men trusted and confided in Pastor Neiderhiser with good reason. He was a master at listening, counseling, consoling, supporting, guiding (spiritually and otherwise), and sometimes setting you straight when needed.”

Olinger said Pastor Neiderhiser was charismatic, funny, and a great storyteller. During his tenure, Pastor Neiderhiser widely expanded the scope of religious education for chaplains and volunteers. He also made available rituals for those of different faiths. In 2015, he received the “Chaplain of the Year” award from state prison officials.

An accomplished musician, he played trumpet, while also composing and arranging jazz and blues songs on the piano.

He was at home in North Wales, where he was known to most people as “Ed.” Wagner said that although he was often “the smartest person in the room,” he was always unpretentious. Born in Jeannette, near Pittsburgh, he was the son of Charles Frederick and Lida K. Neiderhiser. He grew up in Erie and graduated from McDowell High School before earning a bachelor’s degree from Thiel College in Greenville, Pa., in 1969.

He was a member of many bands and musical groups, and loved to bicycle and kayak. He is survived by his wife of 33 years, Sally; a son, Joshua; a daughter, Christy L. Dougherty; a stepson, Jason Wallace; and two grandsons. He was married to Catherine V. Dougherty. They divorced; she survives.

Services were Monday, April 29.

Memorial donations may be made to St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, 211 S. Main St., North Wales, Pa. 19454, or First Thursday Jazz, c/o the Green Fork, 508 E. Montgomery Ave., North Wales, Pa. 19454.