W. Jack Lewis

December 16, 1915 — June 15, 2002

W. Jack Lewis served Cornell as Director of Cornell United Religious Work from 1963-81. An ordained minister, Lewis was educated at the University of Texas at Austin and the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Prior to coming to Cornell, he served as a chaplain with the U.S. Navy in the Pacific theater in World War II, where he ministered to one of the first African-American Marine Corp units. After the war, he worked with university students as a Presbyterian minister in Austin, Texas. In the early 1950s, he founded the Christian Faith and Life Community, a residential, coeducational, and racially integrated lay center for University of Texas students. The Community was a model that greatly influenced strategies for ministry in higher education as well as future lay communities.

As Director of CURW, he served Cornell during a tumultuous time of student unrest and academic reform. With the campus sharply divided over issues of race and war and generational lifestyles, the lanky and genial Texan was a mediating presence, wise counselor, and advocate for social justice. Under his leadership and with his support for student activists, CURW became a center for dialogue on the sociopolitical issues facing the campus and nation. Lewis’ commitment to religious and cultural inclusiveness fostered ties to all segments of the Ithaca and Cornell community.

During his tenure at CURW, Lewis helped establish a host of enduring community services. Among them were the Festival of Black Gospel, the Center for Religion, Ethics and Social Policy (CRESP), Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service, Pastoral Counseling Service, the Commons Coffee House at Anabel Taylor Hall, and Hospicare. In his retirement years, he helped set up the hospital chaplaincy at Cayuga Medical Center and he organized the Hospital Visitation Program supported by Cornell’s Human Resources office.

He was an active member of the general faculty and the emeritus faculty. With the help of President Frank H.T. Rhodes, Lewis administered a revival of the University Baccalaureate Service at Commencement after a hiatus of eight years.

Lewis was a vital member of the Kendal community, where his wife, Mary, still resides. He continued his ministry at Kendal by organizing monthly interfaith worship services, an annual fund through which Kendal residents collectively support community organizations, and by conducting memorial services. He was frequently called upon to conduct weddings and funerals for Cornell faculty, staff, alumni and other members of the Ithaca community.
community. Despite a crippling accident that left both of his legs broken, Lewis found his way back to mobility and resumed his round of hospital visits.

He left us all in his debt and he will be remembered as a faithful, caring friend. His life is captured in his daily prayer:

Today with God’s help,
I’ll do the best I can
with what I have,
where I am,
and I’ll care about others.

Timothy C. Marchell, Carolyn Taber, Robert L. Johnson