

Rev. Seiichi Michael Yasutake Award given annually by the Diocese of Chicago Peace & Justice Committee

Each year, the Peace & Justice Committee of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago gives an award to a peacemaker in honor of Rev. Seiichi Michael Yasutake. Rev Yasutake was an outspoken Chicago activist and Episcopal priest who fought for the civil rights of imprisoned protesters. He died in 2002.

Father Yasutake knew injustice. As a young man living in Seattle, he was forced with his family into an Idaho internment camp during World War II. After 18 months in the camp, he was permitted to attend the University of Cincinnati. But when asked to take an oath of loyalty to the U.S., he told authorities he was opposed to war, killing and the military draft. Soon, he was expelled from the university.

His family said the experiences fueled his interest in helping others seek justice, especially black, Native American, and other minority prisoners. Though some called him radical, Father Yasutake said, "It doesn't matter how many people think the other way. I get strength and satisfaction from my passion for equality, my faith in religion, and what it really stands for."

Father Yasutake graduated from Boston University in 1948. He went on to receive a Master of Divinity from Seabury Western Theological Seminary at Northwestern University and was ordained a minister in Chicago in 1950. While at St. Paul Episcopal Church, he met and wed Ruth Sonoko Tahara. She died in 1998, after 47 years of marriage.

During the height of the civil rights and anti-war movements, Father Yasutake was regional campus minister of the Episcopal Church, Midwest Province. A frequent visitor to imprisoned student protesters, "he identified with many young students who were publicly calling for social justice and peace," said his sister, Mitsuye Yamada.

For nine years he was a parish priest at St. Raphael the Archangel Episcopal Church in Oak Lawn. He earned his PhD at Loyola University in 1977. Father Yasutake was an assistant pastor at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church for more than

10 years. He also was a minister for a small Japanese-speaking congregation at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Chicago for more than a decade.

As executive director of the Interfaith Prisoners of Conscience Project, Father Yasutake traveled the country to protest prison sentences. His daughter, Sandra Conners, said he was arrested several times for civil disobedience. While many do not recognize the existence of political prisoners in the U.S., Interfaith Prisoners of Conscience Project worked to support their rights of belief and association without being incarcerated as "criminal," which they are by the judicial system. There was great difficulty in doing the support work involving prisoners of conscience in U.S. prisons, but Rev. Yasutake brought out the kind of commitment required to do what is right even "on unpopular ground." We honor him with this award.