

# Nationally recognized youth minister from Baltimore dies at 52

Brian Johnson, a Baltimore native who became nationally prominent in youth ministry and served as director of the office of adolescent catechesis and evangelization for the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, Texas, died June 19 at 52. He was remembered for his larger-than-life personality, his effective engagement with youth, and his impact on youth ministry at the national level.

Father Donald Sterling was pastor at St. Cecilia in West Baltimore when Johnson was a boy growing up, and when he became youth minister for that parish and the nearby St. Gregory the Great.

“He was a typical little guy – inquisitive with a sense of humor,” remembered Father Sterling, who is now pastor of New All Saints in Liberty Heights.

Bob McCarty, who worked for what is now the Archdiocese of Baltimore’s division of youth and young adult ministry from 1983 to 1997, began working with Johnson in 1988.

In addition to his work at St. Cecilia and St. Gregory, Johnson became involved with archdiocese-wide programs, such as the High School Leadership Initiative, or High-Li, which he had participated in as a youth and returned to help staff as a youth minister, McCarty recalled.

Johnson also started participating in national workshops and conferences on youth ministry.

“He caught the attention of people around the country,” McCarty said.

Johnson received a job offer from the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston to serve as associate director of youth ministry in 1992.

“I remember encouraging him to take that job,” Father Sterling said. “The opportunity was there.”

According to McCarty, Johnson rose quickly in Houston, becoming director of youth ministry before the close of the 1990s. In the meantime, he grew in national notoriety, particularly for his rousing talks.

“He became known for call and response,” McCarty said. “He would be up on stage with 20,000 in the audience, and he would call, ‘God is good,’ and the audience would respond, ‘All the time.’ Brian was the master of that, and people picked it up all over the country.”

“He was a preacher,” McCarty continued, referring to his friend’s rhetorical style, “but he was also a strategic thinker. He was always asking, ‘What does it take to do youth ministry well?’ and ‘What’s the vision here?’ He was always thinking about things like that.”

Keynote addresses at the 2015 Mid-Atlantic Congress and the 2014 Catholic Schools Convocation were among the presentations Johnson gave in the Archdiocese of Baltimore in recent years.

Father Kevin Farmer, pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Frederick, got to know Johnson in the late 1980s and early 1990s, after he took a one-year leave of absence from his priestly formation to work full time in youth ministry. They stayed in touch.

“We spoke to each other a couple months ago,” Father Farmer remembered. “Within two minutes of that phone conversation, I had to shut the door because I was laughing so hard, and I thought my staff would worry something was wrong.”

Father Farmer recalled Johnson’s passion for youth ministry, with a “particular love for the African American community, which we have so little representation for.”

“He identified himself as an African American by birth and a Catholic by choice,” Father Farmer added.

Johnson’s younger sister, Renita Woodus, a parishioner of St. Cecilia, said her brother was heavily involved with Harambee, a ministry for African American youth which emphasizes connection with heritage and spirituality, and cultivates leadership qualities.

Woodus said she and her brother had “typical sibling rivalry” growing up, “but when

it was all said and done, Brian was all about family.”

“He looked out for me to this day,” she added.

Friends and family were amused by Johnson’s devotion to his adopted city.

“He loved Houston, and he even loved their sports teams,” McCarty said. “We never understood that.”

“He came home one year for Christmas,” Woodus remembered. “He got stuck in the snow, and he vowed to never come back to Baltimore in the winter. He always visited in the spring and summer after that.”

In a statement posted on the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese’s website, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, Archbishop of Galveston-Houston, called Johnson “an inspiration to the youth of our archdiocese.”

“He had a profound impact on not only the young people he served and their families, but also on the formation of youth ministry leaders.”

McCarty said Johnson had a motto that guided his life:

“There is nothing that God and I can’t handle together.”

In addition to services in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, a wake will be held for Johnson at St. Matthew Church in Northwood on July 1 at 9 a.m. A funeral Mass will be offered at 10 a.m., also at St. Matthew.

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