



# Woodrow B. Seals Laity Award

Recognizing Laypersons For Outstanding Commitment To Christ

**Judge Woodrow B. Seals**, who helped to establish Perkins Theological School for the Laity in 1974 to provide in-depth theological education for laypersons, was a noteworthy leader in the church, the community, and the world.

An active layperson, Judge Seals served at St. Stephen United Methodist Church in Houston. As chair of Evangelism, he reached out to the local community and brought in many new members. He instituted a program of support to the needy, which later became the Society of St. Stephen. He also founded a Peace Advocate program, which received national United Methodist recognition and support. He acted as a lay delegate to Jurisdictional, General, and World Conferences of the Church, and served on national boards.

Through his profession as a lawyer and then as a judge, he benefitted the community in Houston and throughout Texas in multiple ways. He served as U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Texas from 1961 to 1966 and was appointed Senior Judge, U.S. District Court, Southern District in 1966. Among his judicial decisions was a 1980 ruling (later upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court) that declared a Texas law denying illegal immigrant children access to free public education unconstitutional. During the 1960 presidential campaign, he arranged a nationally publicized meeting between John F. Kennedy and Protestant clergy, which was credited with helping to disarm the contentious religious nature of the campaign.

Beyond the U.S. border, his influence and leadership received notable recognition. Judge Seals became the first non-Catholic to be granted the Papal Benerementi Medal, awarded by Pope John Paul II in 1979, for his work with the needy. In 1987, he was honored with the World Methodist Peace Award from the World Methodist Council.

**Nominations to be submitted by March 1, 2024**  
Award presented at the annual Perkins Theological School for the Laity

Awarded first in 1993, the Woodrow B. Seals Laity Award has been presented to more than 45 distinguished laypersons throughout the years. Their efforts to enrich the lives of those near and abroad serves as testimony and encouragement to us all.

For a list of past recipients, follow this link:  
[smu.edu/sealsrecipients](http://smu.edu/sealsrecipients)

**Perkins School of Theology** presents the Seals Award annually to a layperson in the United States who exemplifies an exceptional commitment of service to Christ through faith and action in the church, community and world. The Seals Award receives support from the Howard-Holbert Endowment Fund.

**Nominations must include documentation representing the three areas listed above, as well as:**

- A one- to four-page document including a biographical narrative and examples of nominee's activities showing commitment to Christian service in the church, community and world
- Three letters of recommendation from clergy and lay leadership of nominee's congregation and/or denomination, as well as supplemental letters of support from officials in other churches or community organizations
- Contact information for primary sponsor who will serve as the contact for Perkins School of Theology

The sponsor should compile all nomination materials and mail or e-mail as one package. Selection is made by a committee of the Perkins Lay Advisory Board. Nominations remain active for three years including the year of submission.

SMU will not discriminate in any employment practice, education program or educational activity on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, genetic information or veteran status. SMU's commitment to equal opportunity includes nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

The Executive Director for Access and Equity and Title IX coordinator has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policies.

### **Deadline**

**Nominations should be submitted by March 1, 2024 to:**

The Woodrow B. Seals Laity Award Committee  
c/o Associate Dean for External Programs  
Perkins School of Theology  
Southern Methodist University  
P.O. Box 750133  
Dallas, TX 75275-0133

**Or by email to:**

[theoexternalprograms@smu.edu](mailto:theoexternalprograms@smu.edu)

### **Information**

**To obtain additional information about the Woodrow B. Seals Laity Award or Perkins Theological School for the Laity, please contact:**

Office of External Programs  
Perkins School of Theology  
Southern Methodist University  
P.O. Box 750133  
Dallas, TX 75275-0133

[theoexternalprograms@smu.edu](mailto:theoexternalprograms@smu.edu)

**Presentation of this prestigious award takes place at Perkins School of Theology during the annual Perkins Theological School for the Laity, which occurs each spring.**