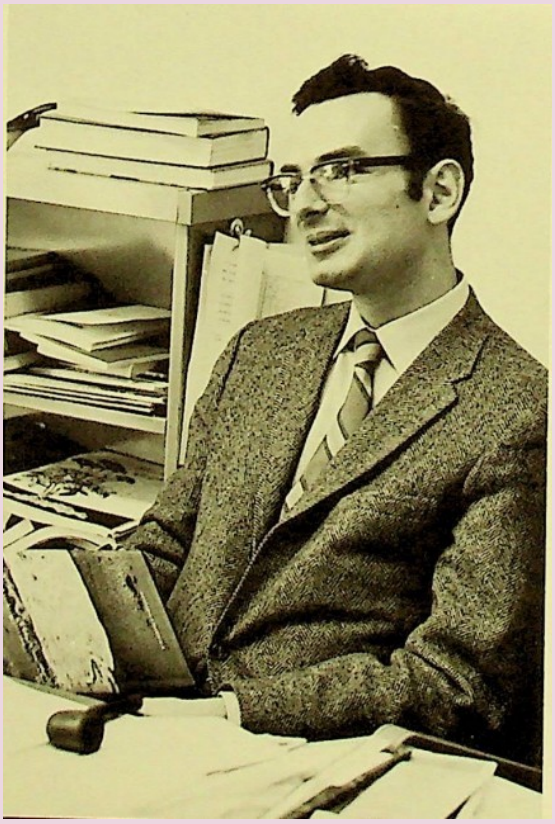
A man of science and faith

Bob Villiard remembered at Slatersville Congregtional Church and Dean College as a private person who made a huge public impact

By ROD LEE

Just in the short time since his death in December, a more complete picture of Robert J. Villiard of Woonsocket has emerged. The portrait drawn by associates and friends of Mr. Villiard is one of a person who avoided the limelight while establishing a legacy of distinguished accomplishment at Dean College in Franklin as a professor of biology and then at Slatersville Congregational Church in North Smithfield as a worshipper, member of the choir, deacon, and Stephen minister.

It wasn't until a senior leader of Slatersville Congregational and the recently arrived young pastor—Sean Amato—spent hours speaking with and listening to Mr. Villiard while he was in hospice care that the full measure of his achievements and contributions came to light.



Much of what has been learned about Mr. Villiard over the past several months will come as a surprise to many of SCC's parishioners.

Named a professor emeritus at Dean after a long career that included being appointed head of the Math/Science department, he was, colleagues say, determined to keep a low profile even while dedicating himself to the success of his students.

He also showed an interest in philosophy and theology that continued to the present day, Pastor Amato noted.

Mr. Villiard's legacy is tied to two institutions with impressive histories in the area.

Nor is he alone in this regard.

Christian de Rezendes is a theater major graduate of Dean and a film maker whose widely acclaimed current project—*Slatersville: America's First Mill Village*—has had an advance pre-screening at SCC. Mr. de Rezendes's mother was a music and voice teacher at Dean Junior College starting in 1979.

Dean and Slatersville Congregational were both founded by prominent individuals. Dr. Oliver Dean started the co-educational Dean Academy in 1865. Its first home was in fact in a Congregational church.

The Slater for whom the village of Slatersville is named concurrently began one of the nation's first Sunday schools, at SCC, and it continues uninterrupted to this day.

These educational initiatives were decidedly different. One was to prepare students for entrance into Tufts College, the other to provide basic reading and arithmetic skills to the young boys working in Slater's mill.

'He died with a flip phone in his hand'

Sitting down to talk about Mr. Villiard at Slatersville Congregational on the morning of March 19th, Pastor Amato and Rick Stelle remembered an individual whose insatiable curiosity defined his being. Mr. Stelle is a member of an advisory group that counsels and guides the pastor, who is new on the job. They were joined by Gretchen Westhoven who is the moderator—essentially the CEO—of the church.

"I feel weird talking about Bob in the past tense," Pastor Amato said.

"He died with a flip phone in his hands," Mr. Stelle said. "Bob was very comfortable in his technology...the dog-eared photographs." The books he collected on subjects that interested him, too, the two men said. Some of these sat on a table to the side.

"When I first met Bob, he was just someone else singing in an older choir," Mr. Stelle said. Mr. Stelle noticed also, however, that Mr. Villiard was "a knowledge sponge. He accumulated more things than I have forgotten."

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Above and right, Bob Villiard at Dean College (notice the professorial pipe in the upper photo).

—Bob Villiard

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Pastor Amato's moving tribute to Mr. Villiard was delivered in a sermon entitled "Righteous Peace Starts With You." Discovering as he sat down on a Friday morning to write the sermon that Mr. Villiard had passed, "I had to sit in reflection," he told his congregation. "I reflected not just upon Bob and his life, but upon our Advent theme—Peace."

A question about God

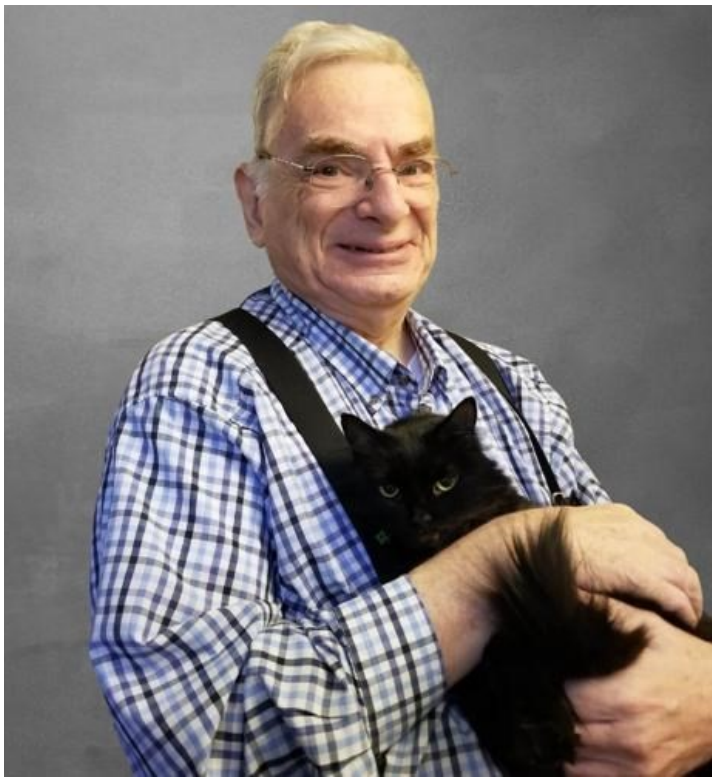
In the sermon and again on March 19th, the pastor mentioned his first encounter with Bob Villiard—early in what became an instantaneous and lasting though short-lived friendship; typical of those Pastor Amato is forging with parishioners who appreciate the fresh energy he brings to the pulpit.

"Bob shook my hand, complimented my sermon and asked 'I have a question for you. Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?'" the pastor recalled.

To parishioners that day he said "for someone like me, visiting your church for the first time and still in seminary, I was a bit terrified by this question, and gave him a stuttering half answer. I mentioned free will, if I remember correctly, and that it wasn't God that let bad things happen. Bob was gracious, and he smiled, and asked if I thought I'd arrived at my 'final answer' on the subject, to which I said I probably hadn't."

Pastor Amato soon found out that Bob Villiard "spoke in a very hurried way but you hung with his every word."

Chiming in, Mr. Stelle said "I was blessed" to know him. "I was trusted almost like family at the end of his life, when he was on dialysis. If I asked him 'do you want to listen to music' he said 'no.' If I asked him 'do you want me to read to you' he said 'yeah.' He was a teacher through and through. The first question he would ask was 'why do you think that?' and he was assertive and thoughtfully so. I did weapons training and Bob wasn't a weapons guy. But if it was interesting to me, it became interesting to him."



Bob Villiard died December 6, 2024, at the age of eighty-five. A professor emeritus of Dean College, he loved the school and the Slatersville Congregational Church.
"By his account, he had lived a full life, and we were part of that full life," Pastor Sean Amato says of Mr. Villiard.
Proud dad (Diane), grandfather (Ruth Villiard-Richard) and great grandfather (Gracyn)

A man on a mission

Like the pastor, Mr. Stelle spoke of Mr. Villiard in emotional terms, when he said "he was a very private person. He lived alone. He had a dear friend. When she passed, it was very hard for him. He was a man who loved his breakfast! Music was very important to him. He had a mild but deep voice. He bought himself a little keyboard. If he was asked how is that beautiful grandbaby of yours"—daughter Diana's Gracyn—he would pull out pictures!"

The time he spent with Mr. Villiard convinced his pastor that he was "a man on a mission." He wanted to know God thoroughly. "Bob explored the matter of spirituality and faith as deeply as he had science," the pastor told parishioners. "In our conversations, he wove together God with atomic principle and radioactivity, compared the nature of biological life to scripture's description of creation, and discussed the necessity of death—yes, death, beautiful and guaranteed and yet so unknown—as part of the cycle of life. A piece of me wondered why this man had never become a pastor, had never gone to seminary. But after a little while, I realized that Bob treated science and faith as complimentary to one another—not as adversarial viewpoints, like many still do, but as hands held





Sean Amato is pastor of Slatersville Congregational Church, a warm and welcoming place situated on the town common in North Smithfield.

—Bob Villiard

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together. I had specialized in one, and he in the other—and in between of backgrounds, we established a fast friendship."

A pastor and a church find one another

Sean Amato's "Righteous Peace Starts With You" sermon served as a touching eulogy to Mr. Villiard, and demonstrated why he was the right choice to pastor the two-hundred year-old church—part of a socially liberal mainline Protestant Christian denomination that began to form in 1957.

Open and affirming, Slatersville Congregational's mantra is "no matter who you are, you are welcome here...wherever you are on life's journey, your questions are welcome here."

Pastor Amato's Biblical knowledge and powerful sermons have sparked a resurgence in attendance at SCC when numbers are falling at other churches. Although young, his world experience is impressive. A sociologist by undergraduate training, he served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine, headed a home for the unhoused in Woonsocket, logged a two-year stint in Cairo, Egypt in outreach to Coptic Christians in an overwhelmingly Muslim setting, and earned a degree from the University of Chicago School of Theology.

The respect he had for Mr. Villiard was apparent in what the pastor said in his sermon, when he pointed out that his friend's "logical and spiritual worlds were one and the same. He often told me that 'creation is ongoing'—that God, having manifested on earth as Christ and then again as the Holy Spirit, has been and will always be at work changing this world around us and through us." Paraphrasing Abraham Heschel—"Bob's favorite theologian"—the pastor said "humans are imperfect vessels. We're messy, egotistical and fearful. We act irrationally, and defensively, and block ourselves off from others."

Sometimes, the pastor said, a group of Christians get it right. "And for Bob, it seemed like this church and its congregation got it right."

Bob regularly related to him, the pastor said, that his time as a Stephen minister exposed him to a side of humanity that even teaching hadn't. "It had shown him that there was good in everyone—not just good in everyone, but God in everyone. That kind of revelation, that sort of self-transformation—it supersedes any other evidence one might need of God's existence, in my opinion."

At SCC on March 19th, the pastor said "I have of lot of unfinished admiration for Bob. He was

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Bob Villiard is third from the left, standing, in this photo of Dean's Math/Science team that was published in the school's Blue Spruce 1983.

'The soul of a poet'

"I know that Bob cared deeply about personal and academic honesty and integrity. He was a man of principle. I recall situations at faculty meetings especially. Faculty always like to hear themselves talk. I am certainly guilty of this at times. With Bob, it was different. He would often sit at the back of the room, observing and listening. He wouldn't just join in on the complaints we faculty traditionally have of salary, course loads, and the Administration. Rather, if the subject interested him, he would sit back and think about it... and then in a clear, resonant and senatorial voice, he would speak his mind combining both passion and reason in his delivery. No one speaks that way today...he was a big man in a robust sort of way. A man of science and reason with the soul of a poet. I recall how much he liked the poet, Robert Bly. I also recall him, for no apparent reason that I could detect, sometimes suddenly surprise people by speaking his Woonsocket French. Few of us knew what it meant! A real humanist."

Jeffrey Skillings
Professor Emeritus of English,
School of Liberal Arts/Humanities
Dean College

"I knew Bob when he was here, but he was also a pretty private individual, so I didn't know him very well. I can only tell you that he was an excellent professor and well respected by his colleagues. He was a consummate professional in every sense of the word and just a genuinely nice person who was interested in helping his students succeed."

Vic Michaels
Associate Professor of Communication and General Manager
Dean College



From Dean to filmmaking

Christian de Rezendes says there was never any doubt that he would attend Dean College, where he earned an Associate's degree in 1995 (Dean became a four-year school around that time).

Creator of the documentary film *Slatersville: The First Mill Village,* Mr. de Rezendes says he spent several years on the Dean campus, where his mother, Natalia, a noted vocalist, taught music.



"I knew the snack bar really well, and a few of the teachers," he says.

When his mother was busy with her students, he would "slip around the corner" and gain access to the big banisters aside the steps of Dean Hall, and "ride them to the bottom."

In the early 1990s, Mr. de Rezendes took an improv class at the Franklin School for the Performing Arts, across the street from Dean.

In 2016, "I was asked by two communications teachers, Vic Michaels and Rich Pezzullo, to return to show an earlier film of mine called *Raising Matty Christian*. It was wonderful to see Vic and Rich again because prior to becoming a theater major I was a communications major for the first semester."

In *Slatersville*, two of Mr. de Rezendes's former professors voice characters, "my English teacher, Jeff Skillings, as Rev. Buck (the same minister who helped Lizzie Borden through her murder trial in Fall River), and Patricia Culbert (now Finlay), my theater professor/director, as another. They are each in a couple of episodes. A friend of mine, Denise Dion (now Giblin, Dean Class of 1996) also voices a character."

Slatersville has enjoyed screenings throughout southern New England, including Newport, Walpole, Norwich, Connecticut and at Worcester State University.

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Dean College photos
provided by Sarah Lindblom, Archivist Librarian

—Bob Villiard

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a man of bountiful curiosity."

"I believe I am more spiritual because of the time I spent with Bob at the end," Mr. Stelle said. "Bob was passionate about Stephen ministry. One of our members is dedicating her class to Bob. She said 'I met a good man and became a better Christian.'

"He adopted this church fully and Stephen ministry had a big part in that," Mr. Stelle said.

Affirming this, the pastor said "[Bob] was still doing calls from his bed, which is not common at all.

"His spirituality was changing and developing until the end of his life. Ongoing, which is a science teacher's perspective. People at my seminary would have been snapping their fingers in appreciation."

The Dean experience, in Bob Villiard's own words

Bob Villiard expressed reflections on life at Dean College in the Dean Bulletin, Fall 1994.

"Dean gives me the opportunity to help students discover their hidden talents and to share with them the awesomeness of the living world."

His other thoughts:

Most unforgettable Dean moment: "Presenting my daughter her Dean diploma at Commencement."

Most significant Dean accomplishment: "Helping students 'find' themselves."

Most significant outside accomplishment: "Becoming a father and grandfather."

Most admired person: "John Villiard, my father."

Favorite interest: "Reading philosophy and theology."

Last book read: "*The Human Face of God* by A.T. Robinson."

Future goal: "To teach human anatomy and physiology in new and creative ways."

Mr. Stelle said "I wanted to get a prayer shawl for Bob. I had the choir pray over it and I handed it to him and said 'I know you don't want this...it was on the Dean (rocking) chair he got when he was named professor emeritus. He said to me 'what do I do with this?' To the end, he didn't want people worrying about him."

"Bob is the kind of person I wished I had run into earlier in my life," Pastor Amato said. "He entered as an academic. He left as a more spiritual and caring person."



Richard Stelle, Gretchen Westhoven and Pastor Sean Amato in front of the organ at Slatersville Congregational Church.
Ms. Westhoven is the church's moderator, "essentially the president of the church, everything not faith-based," she said.
"It's a job everyone avoids!"
"And you are very good at it," the pastor said.