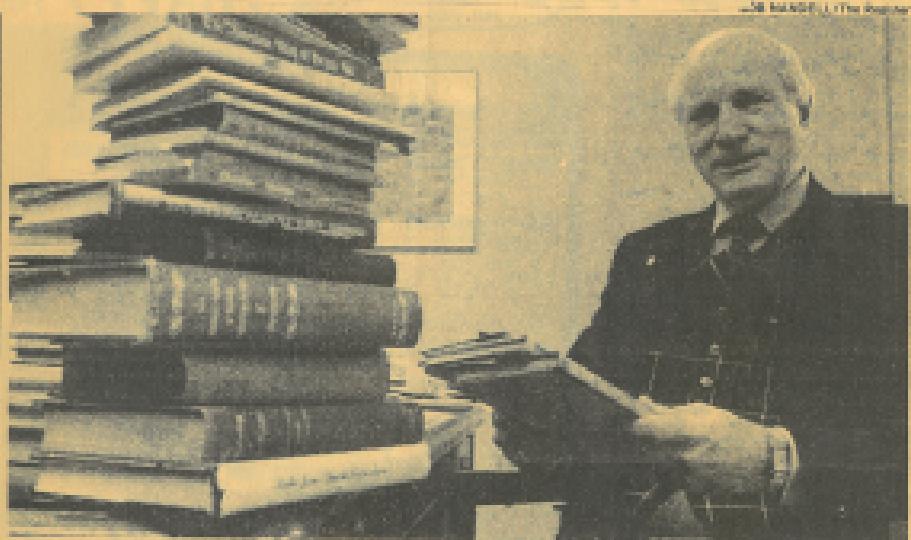


## RELIGION



The Rev. Harold Varse is retiring after 17 years leading the Des Moines Area Religious Council.

## Religious council losing its 'driving force'

By WILLIAM SIMBRO

Register Religion writer

As the year ends Sunday, so will an era in the religious community with the retirement of the Rev. Harold Varse as executive director of the Des Moines Area Religious Council.

In the 17 years Varse, 68, has been at the helm, the council moved from an all-Protestant organization struggling for survival to a vibrant interfaith body with a wide scope of programs.

It has grown from some 180 member congregations to 237. The operating budget has jumped from \$23,000 to \$80,000. But, through contributions to its Emergency Food Pantry and other human-service programs and through efforts of about 400 volunteers, the council had an estimated \$600,000 operation in 1986.

### Spirit of Unity

Varse said he's confident the spirit of united effort in the religious community will continue with next week's change of the guard.

The council's administrative Cabinet has named the Rev. Forrest Harris as the new administrative director, effective Tuesday. Harris, who was pastor of First Reformed Church in Alexander, Ia., from 1968 to 1973, has been pastor of Our Savior's Reformed Church in Brooklyn Park, Minn., since 1973. He has also been half-time regional execu-

tive for the Reformed Church in America since 1983.

Varse doesn't believe the council is made in his image.

"When I was a pastor I came to an enabling philosophy," said Varse. "Let the people of God be the people of God and don't try to do it for them. I didn't change philosophy when I started working for the Des Moines Area Religious Council. I didn't try to build the council around Harold Varse. The idea is to let the leaders lead and involve the lay people in planning programs and carrying them out."

### Dying Body

In 1977, the 28-year-old, all-Protestant Des Moines Area Council of Churches was dying. The name was changed to the Des Moines Area Religious Council after a decision to open membership to congregations other than Christian churches.

Varse, who had founded Faith United Methodist Church in Ankeny in 1969, was hired as executive director on a half-time basis. In 1977, he left the Ankeny parish to do the job full-time.

Varse credits Bishop Maurice Diagramm, former head of the Des Moines Roman Catholic Diocese, with the decision to make the council inclusive. "Bishop Diagramm said Catholic parishes would not respond [to invitations to join the council] unless membership was open to Jewish congregations," said Varse. "He had a deep commitment to that."

After winning from Varse and others, the ice was cracked in 1978 when Holy Trinity parish became the first Catholic congregation to join. In 1979 Tifereth Israel Synagogue became the first Jewish congregation to become a member. His Catholic parish and all three Jewish synagogues are now members.

And First Unitarian Church and Unity Church of Des Moines — both considered outside mainline Christianity — have joined as well.

To join the council, said Varse, a congregation must "agree to be God's people and to work together without asking any congregation to compromise its principles."

Varse said the two prime missions

of the council are to provide programs that strengthen the life of the member congregations and to do together whatever can be better done as an organization.

Some 27 ministries operate through 19 volunteer committees and departments. Probably the best known is the Emergency Food Pantry, started 13 years ago. Last year, more than \$400,000 in food and money was given to provide emergency food to about 15,000 persons.

Another ministry, Compassion in Action, meets the emergency needs of local or transient people who contact a church or synagogue for help. Using the United Way's First Call for Help as a clearinghouse to avoid duplication, a stranded traveler may receive a meal, a tank of gas, or help with a utility bill to keep from becoming homeless.

The Child Care Assistance program provides subsidies to low-income working mothers to help them keep working and stay off welfare. The PISH program provides volunteers for such work as painting up stairs windows for the elderly and providing transportation for medical care.

### January Thaw

The council started the popular January Thaw program of eight classes for religious and personal development, now co-sponsored by the St. Joseph Educational Center and the Jewish Federation of Greater Des Moines. Eighteen courses will be offered next month.

LADOS (Loss After Death of Spouse) is a support group for widowed persons, formed in 1981; and Hospice of Central Iowa is the result of a council task force that launched a hospice program for the dying in 1978.

Other council efforts include annual ecumenical Holy Week services at a downtown site and speaker panels to promote cross-cultural and interracial relations.

Varse began his seminary studies in 1948, the year the World Council of Churches was founded and a time of great enthusiasm for ecumenical relations. A commitment to ecumenism, he said, has shaped his ministry ever since.

"Living in that arena for 40 years has been a rich pilgrimage," he said.

Some 50 of those years have been in the Des Moines area. Varse was active in the old Council of Churches during his 10 years as pastor, starting in 1951, at the former St. Andrew's Evangelical United Brethren Church. He was president of the council for a year.

"He has been the driving force," said Lawrence Myers, this year's council president. "He has been the glue that held us together."

Varse, he said, "has immeasurable energy in representing [the council] and recruiting new members. Most of the growth has been due to his hard work and determination. The organization is a credit to his 17 full years of hard work."