

The Rev. L. Yates Harris, comforted grieving families

By JACQUELINE CHARLES
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Though he never "officially" went into the funeral home business like his father, the Rev. L. Yates Harris devoted the latter part of his life to comforting grieving families.



Harris

"He filled a need that we here in the funeral service business needed," said Paul Taylor, 52, senior funeral director at Fred Hunter's Hollywood Memorial Gardens Home. "It made no difference to him what religion they were."

A Roman Catholic priest who retired two years ago from St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Fort Lauderdale, Harris died Friday, just hours after performing a funeral. He was 64.

"He was the minister on a service Friday morning, went home, had lunch, had a heart attack and died," said Taylor, Harris' friend for almost 20 years. "We are grieving here as much as any family."

Born Lynnewood Yates Harris on Feb. 4, 1932 in Milford, Del., Harris started his career in teaching before devoting his life to Christ and the church. His parents, Alfred and Elsie Harris, owned and operated a funeral home.

Harris attended mortuary college, but chose instead to become a teacher, Taylor said. He taught for 14 years in the Maryland public school system, then was a guidance counselor for five years.

Although neither of his parents was Catholic — his father was Jewish — Harris decided to enter

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the Catholic faith. After graduating from the Pope John Paul XXIII National Seminary in Boston, Harris in 1978 was ordained a priest at St. Clement's Catholic Church in Wilton Manors. As a priest, he continued his work with young people as the chaplain at St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale. He was there for 16 years.

"He was totally concerned about young people," said Stephen Brito of Plantation. "He always seemed to be there for them. He was a very good father for a lot of kids."

Stephen Brito and his wife, Mary Joan, met Harris 15 years ago, soon after he arrived at St. Thomas Aquinas. They "adopted" him, seeing him three to five times a week, and talking with him daily.

"We have five sons, and he was a guidance counselor for four of them. He was pretty much a member of our family," Stephen Brito said.

Brito said Harris had a history of heart problems, suffering his first heart attack in 1980, followed by open heart surgery in 1990 and then a stroke last year.

Said Taylor: "He was a very warm, sympathetic, empathetic individual. You could take whatever he told you to the bank."

Harris is survived by friends like Taylor and the Britos. Visitation is 2 to 4 p.m. and 6 to 8 p.m. today, with a prayer service at 7:30 p.m. at Fred Hunter's Hollywood Memorial Gardens Home, 6301 Taft St., Hollywood.

A funeral Mass will be at 11 a.m. Tuesday at St. Clement's Catholic Church in Wilton Manors.