

**MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR
THE REVEREND JOHN SPROLE LYONS II**
First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia
March 27, 2010

**REMARKS BY
THE REVEREND PHYLLIS H. KORT**

It is my honor and privilege to represent the Session and the Congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of Durham, North Carolina as together we observe this final office for the Rev. John Sprole Lyons II.

We called him John. It was not until I had a conversation with his daughter, Mary Alicia and his son, Jon that I learned that he had, all his life, been known as Sprole—which, when I say the name, connects him significantly to Atlanta and to this beautiful place. It was I who took his first call to First Church in Durham about 8 years ago. “I’m John Lyons,” he said, “and I’m wondering if your church has a program or service that could help me get to church on Sunday.” He explained to me that he’d recently moved to Durham and that 10 years before he had suffered a massive stroke. You see, it was while he was undergoing rehab following the stroke that he found that other stroke victims found it difficult to say the name Sprole. That was when he took on his first name, and became John.

I was the first to pick him up and take him to church—a bit naïve of me since he was not small and his wheel chair was heavy for me. Subsequently we had a small number of people who faithfully picked John up on Sunday morning and saw him safely home again after church. Couples, individuals, they provided John a ride to church—but, perhaps equally important, they gave him friends with whom to chat and talk each week. They were faithful—but so was John. He was never too tired, it was never too much for him, weakened though he was, to come to church. Church, in these last years of his life, continued to be, as it had been throughout his life, the significant and important thing for him. He never lost his interest in things theological, or in life in general during these last years. He continued keen interest in many things: ideas, cars, cameras, discussion. He listened carefully to sermons and was not always reluctant to comment on them as he saw fit, sometimes phoning us pastors, sometimes sending us hand written (not always easily legible) letters to carry on discussion.

John was a man of faith. The living of his life was not easy. But amazingly, in spite of all he went through, we never heard him complain about his lot or his circumstance. He seemed to be grateful for what he had rather than either embittered or self-preoccupied.

John was always visible in church. The space for wheelchairs is right up in the front of the sanctuary. His presence there gave us always a bit of a jolt—a recognition of what can happen to a human body, an understanding of what it took for him to get there, a kind of profile in courage—a kind of letting go of pride that requires perfection in ourselves if we are to be seen in a public setting. How difficult it must have been for him after so many years of church leadership to be in the position of only receiving from rather than giving to. Worship was very important for John, more important than about anything—and he had a need to be there.

Our congregation was enriched by John’s presence. He is already missed by all who worshiped with him. Many, including my colleague, the Rev. Joe Harvard, also a Columbia Seminary graduate, many are those who send on with me their affection for John and a recognition of what his presence among us represented. A permanent testimony to John will be in our church library provided by the gift of his books from his family. There will be a plaque on the wall of the Memorial Garden at First Presbyterian Church in Durham to celebrate his memory and his time among us. When I think of John, I think of those words from the Fourth Gospel describing the forerunner of Jesus, “There was a man sent from God and his name was John...or, as most of you know him, his name was Sprole.