

Biographical information as published by RI College:

H. PHILIP WEST, JR. – DOCTOR OF LAWS
GRADUATE COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER – MAY 17, 2007

For the past 18 years, H. Philip West, Jr. served as Executive Director of Common Cause of Rhode Island, a non-profit organization committed to the ethical reform of government.

A native of rural Grahamsville, New York, son of a Methodist minister, West became influenced by the teachings of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and became an activist in the fight for civil rights as a Hamilton College undergraduate in the early 1960s. Later, while attending Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University, and then as an ordained United Methodist minister assigned to some of the toughest neighborhoods in New York City, West expanded his activism, working with street gangs in the South Bronx, and later serving as executive director of a community center in the city's Bowery section. In that role, he witnessed first hand a culture of corruption on the part of some government officials with which he dealt – and the indifference of many other officials who accepted these injustices with little or no apparent protest.

In 1988 when his wife was offered a position as director of a battered women's shelter in Rhode Island, West followed her to their newly adopted state. Unemployed by the move, West answered an ad seeking an Executive Director for Common Cause of Rhode Island, hoping to engage his grass-roots organizing skills and passion for fairness and ethical treatment of all individuals in an effort to improve upon what many had described as a state beset with significant systemic ethical challenges.

As Executive Director of Common Cause, West is credited as a key leader in the battle to enact numerous governmental reforms. These include a successful Ethics Commission challenge to a sitting governor; merit selection of all judges; downsizing of the General Assembly; four-year terms for state general officers; stricter and more comprehensive disclosure requirements for lobbyists; stringent new campaign finance limits and disclosure requirements; closing of "revolving door" appointments for state appointed and elected officials and for elected municipal officials; protection of citizens who petition government from so-called "SLAPP-suits;" new laws against nepotism; restoration of the right to vote for felons upon release from prison; measures to make the process of legislative redistricting more open and accountable to the public; strengthening of the state Ethics Commission; advocacy for online access to legislative information, campaign finance reports, and other reports by public officials, lobbyists, and state vendors; and strengthening of laws requiring public access to government meetings and records. His most recent notable successes have included the long struggle for passage of a Separation of Powers amendment to the Rhode Island Constitution (approved by voters in 2004), and the subsequent efforts to enact implementing legislation in the General Assembly – a task that still continues.

In addition to his work with Common Cause, West served as president of Greater Elmwood Neighborhood Services. He has also been active in relief efforts in Africa, assisting victims of civil wars in Mozambique and Liberia and working in anti-apartheid efforts in South Africa.

In 2006, West retired from his post at Common Cause and began the process of writing a book about his experiences. He and his wife of 41 years, the Rev. Anne Grant, continue to reside on the south side of Providence. They have two grown sons.