# The Rev. Harry Maghakian, who founded nonprofit People Incorporated, dies at 94

His 50-plus years as a Presbyterian minister came with a faith in the power of a single individual to change the world.

**By Chris Serres**
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The Rev. Harry Maghakian, a pioneering advocate for people with mental illness and the founder of People Incorporated, died last month. He was 94.

In his Sunday sermons, the Rev. Harry Maghakian was fond of quoting a passage from the Bible: "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move."

The passage from the Gospel of Matthew seemed to reflect Maghakian's own larger-than-life ambitions and his faith in the power of a single individual to change the world. In his more than 50 years as a Presbyterian minister, it sometimes seemed as if Maghakian was capable of moving mountains. The son of Armenian immigrants developed some of the state's first halfway houses for people struggling with mental illness and drug addictions, founded a nonprofit that would later become the state's largest community mental health organization, and preached with a charismatic fervor until he was 92 years old.

Maghakian died on May 15 of congestive heart failure. He was 94.

"My father believed that if he loved people and stood for the underdog, then that would take off and spread," said his son, the Rev. David Maghakian, a Presbyterian minister and child protection worker who lives in St. Paul.

Harry Maghakian was born in Los Angeles in 1924, soon after his parents fled genocide in Armenia during World War I. After high school, Maghakian was drafted into the U.S. Army and assigned to the 10th Armored Division in Germany. He earned a Purple Heart after his right arm was nearly blown off by a heavy piece of

shrapnel. Despite multiple surgeries, his arm would never thoroughly heal and he would remain in pain the rest of his life.

"My father would say, 'Everyone has scars, and you have to see that in people and help them,' " his son, David, said.

When the war ended, Maghakian returned to Los Angeles, studied business at Pepperdine University and started his own real estate business. At the time, Maghakian was also head of the youth ministry at Knox Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles, where he met his future wife, Judy. Within a year Maghakian had a sudden change of heart and decided to pursue the ministry full time; he abruptly sold his real estate business and the couple moved to San Francisco, where Maghakian joined the seminary.

From the beginning of his ministry, Maghakian preached about the suffering of people with psychiatric problems, at a time when mental illness was still shrouded in secrecy.

In 1969, while leading the Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, Maghakian became concerned about the growing number of homeless men, mostly veterans, wandering the streets near his church in the Selby-Dale neighborhood. After hearing the men's stories over coffee in the church basement, Maghakian persuaded five Presbyterian churches to launch a new nonprofit — known as People Incorporated — that would offer housing, group therapy, and employment assistance for people with mental illness and substance use disorders.

Over time, Maghakian became increasingly concerned about the shortage of stable, affordable housing for marginalized populations. His research took him on a sabbatical to Harvard University in 1971, where he studied alternative communities and traveled to Israel, living on a kibbutz with his wife and two children. Based on these experiences, Maghakian began to buy houses in the Selby-Dale neighborhood in St. Paul, and he recruited an army of church volunteers to convert them into halfway houses with support services.

"It was a radical concept," said his son, David. "That was still a time when people with mental illness were very much hidden in institutions or stigmatized."

Maghakian would lead People Incorporated for the next 17 years, helping to transform a tiny nonprofit into a sprawling organization serving people throughout the Twin Cities. Today, it is Minnesota's largest nonprofit provider of mental health services, with 56 programs that serve nearly 14,000 clients and has an annual budget surpassing $50 million.

"My father planted the seed," said his daughter, Sally O'Keefe, "and from there it blossomed."

Besides his wife and two children, Maghakian is survived grandchildren Erika, Mikaela, Kevin, and Garrett; and great-grandchild, Kendall. Services have been held.