

*Obituary*  
**William Lawrence Elster**



**Early Life**

William Lawrence Elster was born in Detroit, Michigan to Robert and Jeanne Elster on January 26, 1955. He was raised in Dearborn Heights, Michigan with four siblings. He was educated in both Catholic and public schools in Dearborn Heights and graduated from Riverside High School in 1973. After graduating from high school he began working at Danny's Foods, and he was fond of recalling how working there helped him to develop his strong work ethic.

He started his university studies in the late 1970's, graduating from Wayne State University with a Bachelor of Arts with high distinction and a double major in history and classical studies in 1981. A number of professors at Wayne State University ignited within him his lifelong passion for ancient and early Christian history. It was also during these years that he developed his belief in pacifism as a tenant of his Christian faith.

Upon receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree, he decided to pursue a Masters degree in Peace Studies at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. While at the seminary, he had another faith awakening and changed his major to studies in divinity. He received his Master of Divinity degree in 1984. Subsequent degrees were a Master of Arts in Teaching from Wayne State University in 1990 and a Doctor of Philosophy in History, also from Wayne State University in 1998.

During his final year in seminary he met Jean Alicia Fuqua. They were married in 1984, one month after his graduation from seminary. Together they were proud to raise two children, Elizabeth Deanna Elster and Isaac Lawrence Elster. They were married for 40 loving years, living in Detroit, Michigan for the entire time.

### **Family**

William was a devoted husband and father, always making himself available to his children. He was a longtime soccer coach for both of their teams and cheered them on from the sidelines during baseball games and tennis tournaments. He also enjoyed annual hiking trips with his son in the Porcupine Mountains and enjoyed playing and relaxing with both children on the beach during annual trips to Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He shared his love of classical studies with his children by giving them Greek lessons at an early age.

Additionally, he doted on the family dogs, first Fagan and then Kofi, and could be seen every morning taking them on long walks in the neighborhood.

He was a good neighbor and was president of the local block club during the family's years living on East Canfield Street in Detroit. There, he worked to beautify the neighborhood, not only in the maintenance of the family home but also taking on community chores, such as mowing the grass in the alley and picking up debris.

He was an avid reader and maintained an extensive book collection, focusing on historical topics ranging from ancient times to modern events.

He and Alicia enjoyed traveling across the United States, particularly as he helped her gain greater insights for her many book projects. And they loved visiting museums and other historical sites as a means of fulfilling their vast intellectual curiosity. They especially relished their bicycle rides along Detroit's Riverfront and around Belle Isle Park. During their vacations in the Upper Peninsula, they rented bicycles and traveled paths along Lake Superior. Especially pleasurable were miles-long hikes through the Porcupine Mountains.

## **Faith Journey**

William's faith journey took a life-changing turn at the age of 17 when he had a spiritual encounter with a divine presence while on a hike in Ann Arbor, Michigan. From that experience, he had a born-again conversion, devoting his life to Christ and beginning a lifelong Christian commitment that manifested itself in many ways, particularly through his interest in ancient Christian history – nurtured during his undergraduate studies – and through his peace studies at the seminary.

It was at the seminary that he developed his exploration of the intersection between pacifism in the early Christian church and certain art motifs from that same period. Based upon those studies, he wrote a groundbreaking essay titled “The New Law of Christ and Early Christian Pacifism,” that was published in *Essays on War and Peace: The Bible and the Early Church* (1986). He also wrote his dissertation titled “Fighting the Higher Battle: The Life and Ministry of Dr. Henry Hitt Crane,” on one of American Methodism's most renowned 20th-century ministers and a pacifist activist.

He continued his exploration of this topic, even traveling to Rome, Italy, with his wife Alicia three times where he gained access to privileged sites, such as catacombs and other venues that were not open to the general public but that held art related to this topic. Based upon years of research and study, he was working on a book compiling his discoveries at the time of his death.

In another manifestation of his faith, shortly after his marriage to Alicia, he became an ordained minister and started a ministry – which was a church plant – in the heart of Detroit. During that time, he made many connections and impacted scores of lives in the neighborhood surrounding the church and was a familiar figure to those living in that community. Following the closure of the church, he then became active in other church communities. He served as council president for Messiah Church in Detroit and was Chair of the Church Council of Metropolitan United Methodist Church, also in Detroit.

In addition to those church leadership positions, he also founded and served as executive director of his nonprofit outreach ministry, Pacifist Christian Ministries. With that organization, he made connections in person and online, sharing the roots of pacifism in Christianity as well as its modern applications. In support of that mission, he wrote the booklet “Eighteen: What it means to become a Christian conscientious objector” and distributed free copies at the Pacifist Christian Ministries booth at the annual Dally in the Alley event near the Wayne State University campus.

## **Teaching**

In addition to his ministry outreaches, William also enjoyed serving students as an educator, beginning as a social studies and history teacher at Dominican High School, an all-girls Catholic school in Detroit. He also taught history, government and current events at Detroit School of

Industrial Arts, a charter high school in Detroit. From there, and until his retirement in 2024, he was a social studies teacher at the University of Detroit Jesuit High School and Academy, where he taught not only world history, American history and government, but he developed a course called “Plagues and Epidemics in History” which he taught for many years. He was also chair of the history department for several years. Many of the courses that he taught were advanced placement courses and his students regularly achieved highest marks in the advanced placement history tests. He enjoyed receiving postcards and notes from students as they traveled the world and then thanked him for giving them a greater understanding of what they were viewing and experiencing. In addition, to support the after-school enrichment activities that were made available to the students, he was the moderator of the Just Peace Club and then the Ping Pong Club.

He was also a part-time instructor in the Department of History at Wayne State University for 16 years, teaching core courses in ancient history, world history and American history.

### **Death**

William died on December 2, 2024 after suffering a heart attack while doing one of his favorite activities: walking the dog with his wife Alicia. He is survived by his wife, two children, daughter-in-law Moshirah Abdalla, three brothers and a sister. He also leaves to mourn his passing a host of other relatives and friends.

Memorial contributions can be made in his honor to either of his favorite charities: World Vision and St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.